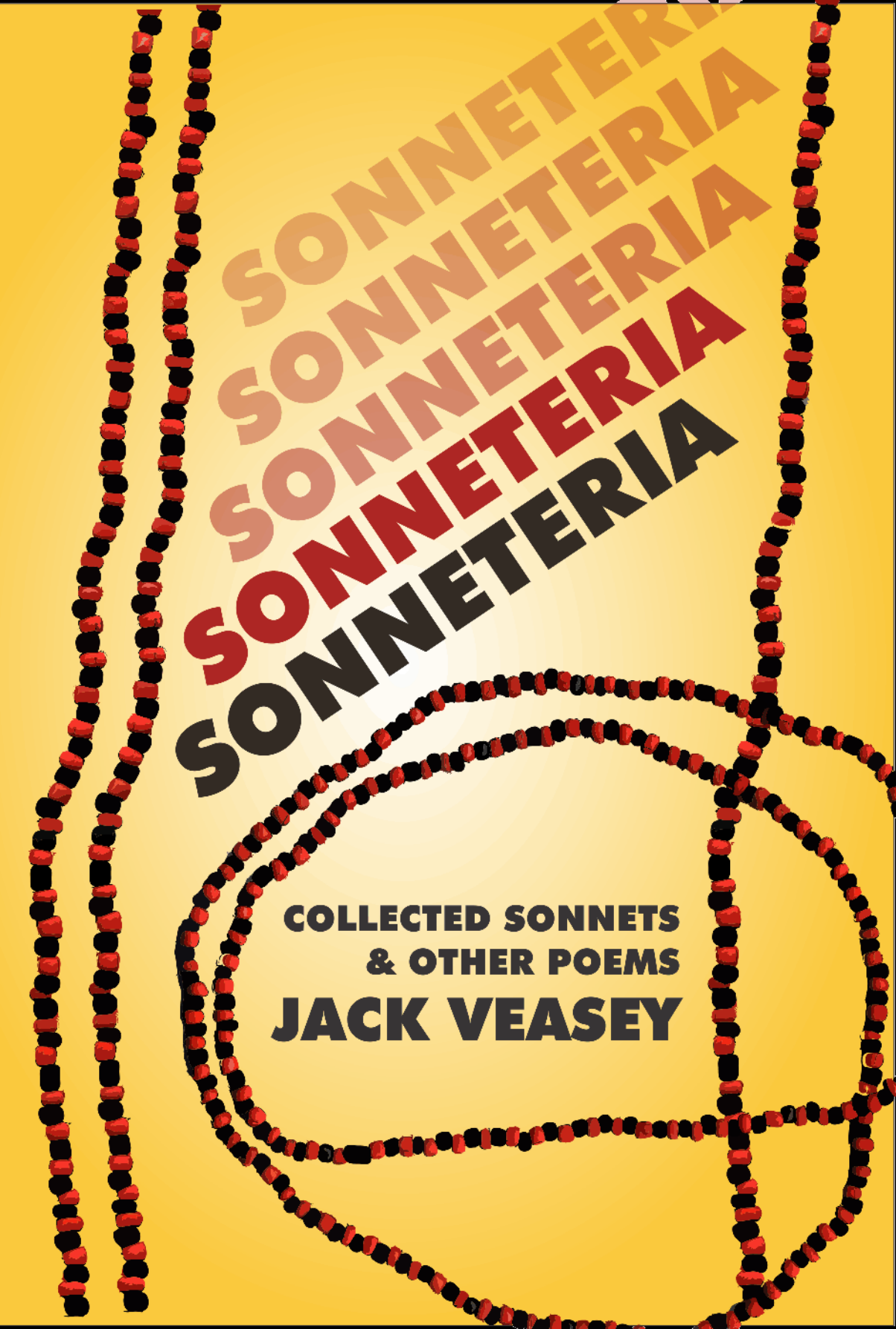

SONNETERIA
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COLLECTED SONNETS
& OTHER POEMS
JACK VEASEY



## PRAISE FOR JACK VEASEY'S EARLIER BOOKS

The publication of *The Dance That Begins and Begins,* Jack Veasey's 12th book, should signal his recognition as one of America's best poets. Veasey never stands apart to poeticize, but is always right there in the thick of things, vulnerable, compassionate, and strong. Adept, accessible, utterly authentic, these poems have heart, soul, moral authority, and the quiet assurance of a major poet at the height of his powers. — Ian Young

One never wants to stop reading the kind of poetry Jack Veasey writes. There is, in joyous abundance, a diner where the likes of Whitman, Sandburg and Steinbeck could enjoy a cup of java. The spotlight of Veasey's work is humanity without varnish, without capped teeth and colored contact lenses. This is the apotheosis of the poetry of involvement. — Bob Tramonte, *Home Planet News*, New York City

The presumption in these poems that people have strengths that can carry them through hard times blends respect and admiration into an empathy for lives. The poem develops an awareness of humanity incarnate in the individual. . . . Although I'm quite certain he is able to identify the tyrants around us, Veasey is not interested in casting out devils as much as he is in applauding the saints, those qualities of being human that are never so much lost as they are temporarily forgotten. — Frank Correnti, *The Pittsburgh Quarterly*

His strongest poems are spare, sympathetic portraits that reveal whole histories of loneliness in small details. These are deceptively simple, surprisingly resonant poems. — David A. Warner, *The Philadelphia City Paper*

Many of his poems present an often troubling world where, for instance, people are relieved that a screaming siren near Three Mile Island signals the burning of a neighbor's house and not a nuclear meltdown, and where, too, the struggle to remain aware is a difficult one for those ground down by work . . . It is in his unresolved attraction to the outsider, his sense of being the only one, the other one, that Veasey shows the sensibility of all minorities. — David Eberly, *Bay Windows*, Boston, MA

The pen of a skilled poet can spin a solitary filament of words that snags readers and then expands to connect them with the writer and one another in a web of universal human emotions and experiences. Jack Veasey is that kind of poet . . . In plain talk that is simultaneously lyrical and lucid, Veasey writes of playgrounds and childhood, of the deaths of parents, of love and disappointment, of the price of forgiveness . . . simple but immensely effective. — Mary O. Bradley, *The Harrisburg Patriot-News*, Harrisburg, PA

## ALSO BY JACK VEASEY

Handful of Hair (1975)
The Truth of Blue (1983)
Tourist Season (1984)
No Time for Miracles (1989)
Quitting Time (1991)
Down and Back (1993)
Tennis With Baseball Bats (1995)
The Moon in the Nest (2002)
The Sonnets (2007)
5-7-5 (2007)
Shapely: Selected Formal Poems (2013)
The Dance That Begins and Begins (2015)



# SONNETERIA

by

JACK VEASEY



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# SONNETERIA



# COLLECTED SONNETS

## A BOUQUET CONSISTS OF ALL ITS FLOWERS, NOT JUST SOME OF THEM

No bride recovers her virginity
when she puts on the long white dress and veil;
although she gives her father back authority
to hand her over to a fellow male
as if she were a piece of property.
She'll make love for the first time as a wife
no matter how much they've made love before.
They'll cross that threshold into their new life.
He'll carry her. Her hands won't touch the door.
Perhaps he'll pilot their ship; how they'll sail
depends on deeper things than just the weather:
whether she takes his name, or keeps her father's.
Whether he listens, or just can't be bothered.
So much determines if they'll stay together.

# A SHORTAGE OF RED

Should you be trapped inside the scene you paint,
create what you desire without restraint.
The only thing you'll have to do without
is red — your favorite color. It's run out.
The color is forbidden you, you see;
all red has fled from your vicinity.
The color simply wants no part of you.
Red does not care if all your days turn blue.
For now, you must behave like red is dead.
The only place you'll see it's in your head.
So now you'll paint what lies before your eyes
in this blue room, though it's a sad surprise.
Of course, you could try painting with your blood,
if you heal fast. Some say, in art, pain's good.

# A WELL-WEATHERED COUPLE

We stay together, though we don't have sex.
Our life is not much like Old Hollywood,
although we both grew up thinking that love should
be just like Astaire and Rogers. Perplex-

ing how the physical part fades, though we
remain so fond, so close — we tell each other
everything. We still laugh, still utter
"I love you" all the time. A family

is what we are — no one would argue that.
And we don't grieve about how one thing's changed.
I guess it might strike some people as strange,
but we have so much else. One note falls flat,

but we still hear a symphony. It seems
a waste to fault facts when compared to dreams.

# ADMISSION

You swore you would not say it, yet you will;
although you'll skirt around it for awhile.
You'll sidestep it quite skillfully, until
you can't help but relax, seeing that smile

that sweeps away defenses with its light;
oblivious to its disarming power,
its innocent amnesia-spreading right
of way that lets a warm forgetting flower

in the mind and from the mouth. You'll say it
like a valve lets out a flood. In his eyes
you may note some change, and you will pray it
isn't fear's first light. Perhaps it's just surprise.

You'll feel relief; regret would be too late.
You'll both walk, quiet, through the open gate.

# ALIENATING

You claim abduction by the saucer men —
I'm not surprised to hear they brought you back.
They probably feel like the female friend
you bedded once, then bragged that you had "sacked"

as if she were some animal you'd shot.
They knew you'd tell a tale no one believed.
Your memory had no need for a blot.
When you shut up, a listener's relieved;

until then, those who hear just watch the clock,
count seconds till polite pretending ends.
Like those who share space with you on this rock,
they did not want to be your friends.

The probing, you think, passed well for affection.
No one gets that close to you but your reflection.

# AN INDULGENCE

The saints are people who have not survived
to see the honor they've received. The Church
decides their status after they've arrived,
presumably, in heaven, where they perch,

angelically, above it all, blissed out
beyond caring what anybody thinks.
It's not sainthood itself the role's about —
it's those they leave behind, here where it stinks.

Some detail plucked from their biography
determines what they are a patron of —
bad nerves, overwork, fire-buggery —
and that's the malady whose cure they love.

And so they spend eternity on call,
deluged with pleas they may not hear at all.

## ANOTHER SNIPPET

Three kids later, he has surgery;
they can't afford a fourth with all the bills.
He wants this change. It will leave his mind free
to focus elsewhere. Bag of frozen peas kills

the discomfort after, he laughs, as his friends
toast to his final fertile night. His mind
is always fertile, though, and sitting at the end
of the deck bar, out for a smoke, the lines

spill from him on his pad, grief for his loss;
one line is "potency no more." His best friend
finds him and he shares. There is another cost
against which no one is insured. You face an end;

each thing you're set free of, you must let go.
He's quit smoke, too; the day's last cigarette burns low.

# ATTITUDE SANS PLATITUDE

He said, “Pretend you’re talking to yourself,”
as if such trite advice could light a bulb
above somebody else’s head, as if
fate were a comic strip printed on pulp

and every story had a moral. He
thinks that people’s brains are all the same, that
we’re all motivated by the ruby
tint of sentiment. But the world’s not flat,

though round seems more slippery. Convenient
as simplicity might seem, you can’t trust
wisdom’s grins. Instincts trump the eminent
philosopher before he turns to dust.

Some live their lives caught in a scripted trap.
You need to find your way without a map.

# BIRD SANCTUARY

These trees remember every bird they've housed:
the ravens who have slummed their winters here
to fill the air with symphonies of loud
caws, every one talking at once, a clear

announcement that they rule over this wood;
in quiet spring, one family of doves
bringing their hungry peeps whatever good
morsels they've found; in fall, one gull who roves

the whole east coast, napping before he seeks
one more loud parking lot; two cardinals
whose cool duet is not chaotic — speaks
in patterns orderly as madrigals;

these branches bear marks from each beak and claw,
small souvenirs of every life they saw.

# BLIND RECUPERATION

These nights your shoulder throbs with constant pain,
while your injury, though undiagnosed,
in rhythm like the drumming of the rain
continually stabs; pain ebbs and flows

and comes and goes again, again, again.
Sleep is impossible in any pose.
You take a pill you hope will tell your brain
convincingly that no sensation knows

the way to reach your consciousness. When
your agony recedes, dreams will disclose
insights you'll just forget, but they'll defend
you and distract the mind, so flesh can doze.

Right now pain is the secret to conceal.
Sleep is the truce; stillness alone can heal.

# BOBBING FOR OBLIVION

Somehow you're floating in the drowning place;
you were supposed to sink, but you can't seem
to stay beneath the surface. Your distaste
for living doesn't trump your lungs that scream

for breath — or gravity, somehow reversed
out here, far from the dull edge of dry ground.
Your inner voice adopts a tone that's terse
to tell you, *Big exhale, then stay face down,*

but listening has never been your strength.
You're not determined enough to give up.
That would involve surrendering, at length —
such irony! — making yourself an empty cup

water could fill. But you're full of hot air,
warmed up by lust for *something* that's not there.

# BUZZARDLY

*For KSK*

Of course the vulture is his favorite bird:
his first name is the first two syllables
of "Carrion." Consumption of things dead
makes sense to him. Not brave enough to kill,

he'll lurk and wait to clean up someone's crime,
willing to reap rewards but not the risk.
The key to his philosophy of time
is "Wait till it's too late." He'll say, "Tsk, tsk,"

as he absconds with those juicy remains.
He'll tell himself this victim is not his.
He does not cause the death, nor share the blame.
The Buddha could eat flesh obtained like this.

It is a quite pragmatic view of things
for someone with no talons, beak or wings.

# CARNIVAL

Twice a year it comes to town, imported
by the local lodge. The grungy men who
run the rides attract the girls who get led
easily, just as the lights will draw bugs, too.

Boom-box music blares (calliopes are
relics of the past). Men, they attract with
wooden ducks that march in rows. A bright blur
greets the drunken eye whose spirits get a lift

from a good gawk. Obnoxious local punks
may volunteer to hurl abuses at
the crowd, until one throws a ball and dunks
him in a shallow tank. It's all old-hat,

but in a town this small, what can compete
with rides, games, grunge, and greasy things to eat?

# COLLECTOR

She has a glass case full of Chinese dolls
as delicate as panes she sees them through.
Their hair and eyes are dark. When a friend calls,
she shows them to the room. The light is blue.

The room is cool in summer. Each doll holds
her fan. Were they alive, you'd think their hearts
would flutter, too. Each doll was bought and sold
time and again. Each is antique. All parts

are perfect. No one ever plays with them.
She is a childless widow, left well off.
She could, if she wanted, have her pick of men,
but rough disturbances don't make her laugh.

Under glass there's no surprise, no loss.
She keeps things perfect, once she's paid the cost.

# CONFESSIONAL POEM

Three dark closets stand along the church back wall:
you choose one, enter, and drop to your knees.
The formula is easy to recall:
bless me, Father, blah blah, easy as a sneeze,
but the rest of this task won't be such a breeze —
you feel embarrassed, soiled, exposed, and small,
as you admit your infidelities —
though only the priest can hear you, after all.

Beyond the priest's there stands another stall.
You hear somebody enter, and you freeze.
Wood walls are thin; through yours, you feel a breeze
that creeps in through some crack. *Describe the ball*
*Some other time,* you think; you're less than pleased
that there could be leaks in your privacies.

# DIRTY LAUNDRY

Grandmom's cellar had these cold, bare stone walls
that were always gleaming wet. The light down
there came from a bare bulb in the dull brown
ceiling. At the room's heart stood a tree — poles

were its branches, poking out every which
way, with dripping laundry hanging on them.
You'd have to shout over the washer's thrum
and slosh — not that she had the talking itch

when she was down there in her dungeon.
A clown marionette hung from a peg
stabbed in the wall above the stairs — egg
on his grinning face, she'd say — her warden.

She spent too much of every day down there,
watched by that leering imp above the stair.

# DAYDREAMS OF A DRONE

He enters the imaginary woods,
well-armed with an imaginary sword,
chanting imaginary magic words.
He'd cut a dragon's head off if he could,

to carry home and hang on castle walls.
But some can't picture what they've never seen;
though woods and weapons are found in
the era he inhabits, no one calls

a row house by the name of "palace," and
his lizards can't breathe fire. The cubicle
in which his workaday life drones its dull
tune sizes down his fantasies. Canned

music just keeps on playing in his head.
Seems his imagination is half dead.

## DIFFERENT TIDINGS

Waves break on your ankles, then on your thighs;
the water's depth increases suddenly,
as the shore slopes further unexpectedly.
You find yourself chest-deep, salt in your eyes.

You start to kick, craning your head to see
in case a grey fin might come cruising by.
You've seen the film too many times to try
ignoring that unnerving memory.

You'd rather float in the motel pool, high
up past the beach and boardwalk; it's not free,
but it's not open to beasts you can't see.
Your wife's not frightened by fish she could fry.

She shudders at the thought of poolside wives
who want to flaunt jewels and compare their lives.

# DEAD SILENCE

No reason to be jealous of the dead,
although we're told they're "in a better place;"
we're told they're "at peace," or reunited
with the loved ones they have lost. The hard pace

of life no longer wears on them. Maybe
if you believe they'll reincarnate, that
last platitude collapses. Mystery
is all we really find, however, at

the limits of our own experience.
We may long to rush into a white light
within which we'll be cleansed of all torments,
no matter how persistently they bite.

But we don't know, even if we believe
in séances and such. And we must grieve.

# DISLODGED

He asked me questions, stirring up the past,
setting in motion swirls of images;
echoes, fragmented, from old brittle chats
only halfway forgotten — a montage

of my brain's floating driftwood and debris.
I had been able to ignore the waves.
lapping the beach around my armory,
ignore the relics a beachcomber saves.

Now I'm thrust face-first, eyes open, in the tide.
The murmuring distorts into a roar.
One rush after another floods my eyes
although I close them; beyond too much — more.

Yet each day I'm bombarded constantly
with new stuff that squats in my memory.

## MISREFLECTION

Now it's like pulling teeth to speak of it,
the brutal injury you can't forgive.
The heart's blood he shed from your silhouette —
a shadow of yourself; no longer substantive,
you've lost so much, you don't know what is left,
you're not sure how you've changed. The face is pale
and strange that greets you in the glass, bereft
of warm expressiveness, suddenly frail
beyond its years. How long the doomed love held
even deceives you now, the gap between
the length you knew and length you felt.
You can't say what it really is you've seen.
You hadn't known him for a year; it felt like ten.
You'd thought him soul-mate; he was not even
        your friend.

# IN A MORE ACCURATE MIRROR

You have, at last, moved far enough away;
your wounds finally faded into scars.
The time has come, at last, when you can say
your truth. But truthfully, you don't know how you are.

You speak from where you stand, your words informed
by all you have absorbed through your old roots.
But now that you've moved on, defiant, scorned,
you stand on ground your steps have yet to bruise.

The face in your new mirror has changed much.
Eyes that have seen too clear now pierce things through.
You want to study everything you touch,
and, even more so, all that touches you.

Your former shell no longer fit your spirit's size.
In your new place, you greet your new self
with new eyes

## SLUR

No, this is not a superficial wound,
although not one that anyone could see;
no salve can soothe, no bandage can entomb
an ache from which no pill can set you free.
Remembering the moment of attack,
you flinch again, recoiling from the blow;
that voice again, that sneering voice comes back,
and all your best defenses are too slow.
The weapon left its mark — you feel it still,
although its tracks are not blue, black, or red.
The moment's passed, but now you walk uphill,
with every step a new throb in your head.
The wound feels deep, although it seems absurd —
although made by no knife, but by a word.

# FORGIVENESS

Forgiveness is a scarce commodity,
the price of which goes up year after year.
It's given, but not handed out for free;
both giver and receiver pay, I fear.
We mustn't only listen, we must hear;
both sides must be clear to each other's eye.
The price is truth's pain, and the price is dear;
and, sadder still, there is no price too high.
And so we strike dark bargains, by and by;
we struggle down the road to compromise;
agree to bend, accept each flaw, and try
to cut our own needs down to size;
We put each other's shoes on for awhile.
We made the error; now we face the trial.

## PHYSICAL THERAPY

In pain, the damaged gather here to heal —
our progress slow, unlike a miracle.
Machines don't hear our prayers, but the pull
and push and stretch that they demand make real
the missing balance muscle needs to feel.
You work on where you're weakest. Pain turns dull
as months inch by, your weekly schedule full
of visits here, where rubber, rope and steel
resist you. But your body moves along.
The clanking plays a hidden melody.
The change may not be one that you can see
but, rising from a chair now, nothing's wrong.
The inner stab you used to feel is gone.
The work's reward comes — just not suddenly.

# SUPPORT

You sit with me before my surgery
and stroke my hand, and softly lend support;
awhile without a word, yet you report
a wealth of subtle sentiments to me.
The nurse pops in, and says that the I.V.
may pinch me; I don't let my face contort,
wanting to seem brave and polite. We court
the best blood pressure with infused tranquility.
It's time to go. The doctor shakes your hand
as if we're at a sports event. I say
"I love you," as you do, with confidence.
They wheel me off. Though I wear no gold band,
I feel your presence near me when I fade.
I'll wake wrapped in your silent eloquence.

## EYEWITNESS

You're haunted by a man you can't recall.
They asked for a description; you had none.
It was too dark; your one glimpse in the hall
was too brief. No detail remains but one,

the baseball cap whose bill hid half his face.
You couldn't guess age, weight — no carnival
prize for you. You think the words, "Ed's Place"
were printed on the cap — where they install

satellite dishes. Perhaps they sold him
one. Perhaps he robbed them, too. The cops
noted the cap without enthusiasm.
One cracked wise: "Ed's is where the buck stops."

You didn't get it; they thanked you, and left.
To them, the whole thing was "a routine theft."

# FEAR OF THE DARK

There is a monster underneath the bed
of every toddler on a stormy night
when clouds collide and flash an awful light
unlike the sun's, and bang to wake the dead.

The monster flails its slimy tentacles
as if to snatch any uncovered limb
that hangs unblanketed, thus tempting him
to drag the whole child down to where he dwells.

All kids know this, and all parents dismiss
the whole idea that monsters can exist.
They don't see how a monster in the head
is clearer than the one under the bed.

And so we hide our heads, imagining
that our dear parents don't know everything.

## SOME COUNSELING ON VOCATION

To find your dreams, don't follow the main road;
you'll find competitors have picked it clean
of ev'ry opportunity. It bodes
poorly for success if visions you've seen

catch many more bright, famished eyes than yours.
Everyone wants the same things, you might say —
but when ev'ryone knocks on the same door,
the word 'no' greets most callers on that day.

You first need to discern what only you
can say or see: what is the very thing
that nobody on earth but you can do.
then face the world, open your mouth, and sing.

You'll find you never hit a note that's wrong
If what you're singing really is your song.

## CONSEQUENCES OF DISCRETION

Love grows despite obstacles, reaches
toward sunlight, although you must meet, hidden,
after dusk. It lives without blessing
by law if it must. In darkness, dressing
yourself like a wound, nervousness-ridden,
still you yearn, eager, for all this teaches.

It teaches you a sacred secrecy —
sweet, but you mustn't breathe to anyone.
You keep quiet the way you'd keep a vow,
the kind your friend must break to join you now.
Your heart swells with this huge news that would stun
if leaked, but also with warm luminosity.

You see your life now by this inner glow,
treasuring this truth no one can know.

# SERIOUS PLAY

*For Chet Williamson*

The lights onstage make some performers blink;
they need to look beyond them to connect.
They need to read what audiences think,
play off of that, react and intersect.

But others hurl themselves into it blind.
They hear themselves flooding the space with sound,
with energy, like some liquid they find
when they open a vein. Their world is round,

a glass from which we drink. We come to feed,
our hollows echoing. Onstage we recognize
our souls exposed. Yet what we think we need
is to forget ourselves. We crave comforting lies.

It is a somewhat nerve-wracking exchange,
whether you are the stranger or the strange.

# THE TEMPORARY TAMING OF WILD MIND

The way the panther paces in his cage
reminds you of how frustrated you felt
when some professor's sneer triggered your rage.
You wish you could caress that sleek black pelt

and feel the muscles underneath, relax
them for him, although he'd rip off your arm.
He wouldn't get that you meant no attack,
or that your blood, so salty, thick and warm,

could reach a boil for reasons much like his.
Such instinct just can't stand to be contained.
You know you see the world just as it is,
but your sandpaper tongue must be restrained

until a paper key unlocks your door,
until you are a fool's student no more.

# COUNTERFEIT WISDOM

*Do you see a man wise in his own eyes? There is more hope for a fool than for him.* — Proverbs 26:12

"I think Charles is more human than divine,"
he said, as if that were a sad surprise.
He had a haughty glitter in his eyes.
The sneer that curled his lip was serpentine.

He'd made himself a minister by mail.
He'd borrowed money to pay the small fee.
Charles was a Doctor of Divinity
who still worked hard, though he was old and frail.

Some people buy what other people earn,
but paper is just paper, all the same.
Some never even hang it in a frame,
while others wear it on their sleeve. We turn

away from lectures, but a friend, we hear.
Charles gave advice, but never with a sneer.

# THE POET CRONE

*In memory of Barbara A. Holland*

She has been called "The Sibyl" of the Village,
though she did not prophesy. No one who
knew her would presume to claim that they knew
what was really in her head, if love or rage
lay there, behind the leather mask that was
her face, which seemed so ancient at a glance.
Those who took deeper looks believed — entranced
by the harsh music of her words because,
unlike the masses, they weren't deaf to
poetry — that truth, too, must fill every
syllable. She'd choose much younger men to be
her objects of obsession, lit in blue.

She'd keep them at a distance, sculpting song
that touching would have shattered before long.

## TO A LONG-AGO FORMER LOVER, ON LEARNING OF HIS DEATH

I felt a pang on learning of your death.
We hadn't been in touch in many years.
The sight of you once made me catch my breath,
though, even then, your age filled you with fears.

You spent part of each day on exercise.
You dieted, and worried that disease
would claim you. And, before our eyes,
acquaintances were dying out. And these,

none of them close, you grieved — though not for who
they were. Each death was just more evidence
to fuel your fear. Meanwhile, affection you
would take for granted, thinking it made sense

to keep a cold front up. Soon, lovers would depart.
Ironically, what killed you was your heart.

## "BEST FRIEND"

You will get used to having me around,
watching you with adoring eyes, glowing
with elevated warmth, my sighs a sound
like background music while filmed action's going,

The energy I throw out like a net
unnoticed but still promising support.
The fact I've fallen is a given, yet
my neediness has not soured our rapport

and I, for one, thank God for that each day.
and I'll be there whenever you allow me,
and always find words sweet and true to say,
and never give you cause to disavow me,

until, at last, you realize one day
that I'm the one who's always there,
who never turns away.

Her voice is low and warm and resonant.
She birthed her first songs during her wild youth.
She had a knack for showing the whole truth,
the edge of which is all timid souls want.
America first saw her in a film
in which a lone wolf would assassinate
her character. This staged death would create
a haunting image: a deep soul, a struggling will —
that she'd outshine if you should meet her in
the flesh, but she'd still seem larger than life.
She might wear other roles, including wife,
but her story would endlessly begin.
"Who is that?" people ask, if she should pass.
Some stars are too bright to stay caught in glass.

# LONGING

Each day I live without the touch of him I love,
I tell myself the promised day will come,
and I will feel him close to me and move
in synchrony with his breath and heart's drum;

I will taste at last the salty tang
of his glistening sweat, and feel his strength
gather me in, my fragments made whole by a pang
of magnetism that through this wreck's length

his glance and glow have wakened once again.
I had been dead but now I ache, and long
simply to hear his laugh or see him bend
to hear my words amidst the rowdy throng.

We have no quarrel, but surrender is
what I look forward to, now that I'm his.

# THIS ONE CONCESSION

If I could talk you into simply holding me,
just out of pity, for a little while;
and maybe a quick kiss, innocently,
just on your cheek or neck — a peck, that's all;

and I could say, so quietly, for no-one's ear
but yours, it's you I love, above all else;
if this private goodnight, brief, bound'ries clear,
you'd grace me with, despite yourself;

if you could set aside your fear of this,
for my sake, and allow me such goodnights,
I'd live with that, give up all hope for bliss,
lovemaking, intimacy rights.

I'd settle for that one moment up close
each time we part. And I could live for those.

# A LIGHT EMERGES FROM BEHIND THE STONE

*(Easter Sunday 2013)*

You know that love can resurrect itself.
Perhaps not with the same tarnished object;
perhaps not in the dust on the same shelf.
But love retains the power to project

its beam again on something else, to shine
again the way the sun does on its rise.
Love reserves the right to blink its eyes
at some refreshed reality, enshrine

some savior who can better bless a bright
new wonder  in this wilderness. Altars
arise out of belief; candles can't cast
their light without a hand to strike their fire.

Love is the secret of its own success.
A God without love has nothing to bless.

# A WARM WEATHERING

The big storm they predicted did not come.
And we were grateful for the false alarm.
No orange sky and hailstones. Yes, humdrum
it may be only to have clouds, and warm

wind stirring tops of trees. But you and I
had other kinds of stirrings that we must
discuss. Out on the deck, under a sky
unmarred by lightning bolts, you kept my trust

and turned me down so lovingly, with such
concern and tenderness, that past conquests
seemed cold compared to you. With so much
warmth in your embrace, your strong arms blessed

me as few others ever have. You drove
me home then. Still, I overflow with love.

# BOZO

Some children will be frightened by a clown,
but one who fills the party air with laughs
may not enthrall a child whose geeky gaffes
make him the butt of others' jokes. The down-

side of a painted smile that doesn't match
the mouth's movements is that, to certain eyes,
it looks like a huge lie. The shoes that size,
the crazy hair, the face almost a mask

like robbers wear — not everybody takes
that much disguise as mere festivity.
Some wonder what's beneath it fretfully.
What happens when that pane of pretense breaks?

Some kids have learned the ugly truth in school —
great rage can seethe in those who play the fool.

# BRICK WALL

I wonder if you ever think of me.
Each day I sigh,  I wish that you were here
in silence, and I don't mean it, you see —
it's habit, though it's been more than a year

since we, mutually, slammed that closet door.
I'll always bear the brunt of your denial,
reminder of that trait that you abhor,
though you still follow its insistent call.

In your brain, you've erected a brick wall,
like the schoolteacher in that film who knew
every child in class could read his mind. All
you feel, you hide, and some of what you do,

but facts refuse to leave your memory.
So unspoken truths haunt both you and me.

# FALSE MOVES

The smirk behind his words is louder than
the meaning of what he has said aloud.
By meaning I mean merely literal,
drowned out by that which has not been pronounced.
A blush belies his businesslike denial;
the child of torment manages a smile.

Enthusiasm you try to conceal
reliably betrays you every time.
Impossible, you say, and yet you dread
what occupies the space left in your head
when any silence has lasted too long,
or when a joke evokes, "That is so wrong."

You're not afraid of anything, you say.
But then your bluff receives a terse OK.

# FIRST IMPRESSIONS ONLY

The man is muscular, yet he is weak.
He sculpts himself, not to attract a mate,
nor for the strength to give what work will take,
nor for the winning of a game or race.

He wants people to see him and feel fear.
He wants to look like he could break men's bones,
like under his skin there are cobblestones
toward which only a foolish fist would steer.

To scare potential enemies away,
he works on his physique for hours each day.
Described as "the strong silent type," he's spared
from conversation. Talking leaves him scared.

The fact is, he's convinced he has no choice —
embarrassed by his own shrill, squeaky voice.

## FOCUSED ON YOU

You don't believe that you are beautiful.
You say you wish you could see what I do.
I don't know why your mirror lies to you;
your glow draws me as tides heed the moon's pull.

I'm pulled to look at you if you're in sight;
I fight the urge and look at others when
they speak to me, and I listen to them,
but only from the need to seem polite.

My heart and mind are so preoccupied
with wanting to bask in your radiance.
It's like music that tugs them toward the dance.
All of me wants to focus on that ride,

Yet life proceeds with practical concerns.
And I pretend, but toward you my mind turns.

# FRIENDSHIP AND A NOOSE

She found the body, had to cut it down.
His mother was in no condition to.
A child should be alive when he leaves you,
or you should be the leaf that first turns brown

on the immediate family tree.
But she, his friend, was in the time and place
where it was she who had to glimpse his face
close-up, in final grimace, and to see

the last look in his eyes, though lightless then.
She told his mother, called the cops, and found a blade.
They say to not touch anything, but when
his mother begged — well, the mistake was made.

Maybe it was a rule one shouldn't break,
but that photo was one no cop would take.

# FRIEND OF A FRIEND

How can you consider trusting him?
He's poor, young — more than once, he's been in jail.
Though what he did should not be called a crime
(he was just two years older than the girl).
Is it the haunted pangs glimpsed in his face —
that quality you can mistake for light?
The energy he brings into the place,
somehow, when he walks in, strikes you as right,
despite how much he borrows from your friends,
the sometimes quite-disturbing things he'll say,
then awkwardly apologize; he bends
boundaries of what we call polite,
but then smiles with that reassuring gleam
in his eye. Later, he'll smile in your dream.

# GRAVEYARD MYSTERY

Across the street, there's an old cemetery;
from the bedroom window I can see it.
Every grave's been there a century
at least; the words on the stones are worn flat;

You can't read many of the names. No one
remains who survives the ones buried there.
And yet, on a grave in the middle, somebody
occasionally leaves a flower like a prayer —

a green carnation. I've never seen who leaves
it there. It would have to be a great-grandchild
if it were blood. Why would anyone grieve
for a soul gone that long? This thought is wild:

What if a fellow ghost left this bouquet?
If you should touch it, would it melt away?

# THE BULLFIGHT PAINTING

It's one of those hideous paintings you see
in a bar or a barbeque joint, that
the owner adores and paid a big fat
price for, from a name in the industry

known as "Bullfight Art." The matador's
in white, cape red as the bull's blood, which we
see spread across his broad black back, set free
from veins by *banderillas* in each shoulder.

The cape's a blur, trailing white lines behind
it, a nod to Impressionism. For
Art's sake, the bull's head lowers, aiming toward
the cape, though his opponent's nearby.

The man's the center of the scene. His grace
at murdering belies his tranquil face.

## THE EX-DIARIST EXPLAINS

I do not keep a record anymore
of everything I do and see and think.
I do not note the date, number each door,
describe whatever stuff my senses drink

in, then list my reaction to it.
More goes on in my mind than in my life
these days, more than enough matter to fit
into my songs. No moment needs a knife

to spear it on, thereby guaranteeing
no escape of detail. The broader blur
that holds my whole long past remains, freeing
me for a longer view. More can occur

to me than fate can squeeze into one day.
I have less to report, but more to say.

## THE FIRST CRACK IN THE GLASS

There is a darkness that can fall by day,
although our eyes can't see it in the sky.
It colors everything we do and say,
betrays our best intentions, wrings a sigh

from us when we just mean to breathe. We hide
behind a mask of brightness,  but we see
right through. Somehow the undertow abides,
and those who hear its low call don't feel free

no matter what brass platitude persuades
them otherwise. This is the dark that falls
behind the eyes, behind our slick parades
of smiles and gestures. We feel trapped by walls

that once comprised our home. Call us depressed.
Denial fails us, though we look our best.

## SISTER'S DISCREET SABBATICAL

The mad nun will walk out into the sun
watched from a distance by two orderlies
assigned to catch her should she try to run.
It is a perfect day.  But if she flees

she knows she won't get far, so she just smirks
and strolls under the trees, fondling her beads.
The hospital is Catholic. With work,
the Diocese agreed to let her keep her rosary,

though it was on the list of items that
a person could perhaps use as a noose.
She isn't in her habit, though; she's flat-
out incognito, like a woman ripe for men to use.

She's nonplussed and dismayed by the restraint.
Visions and voices should make her a saint.

# SLAP HAPPY

Some pains blur into pleasure easily,
especially a firm slap on the bum —
with hand and bum both bare, naturally.
I know it seems like punishment to some,

but we are not discussing children here.
Sweet naughtiness can call for a reward.
The sound of flesh on flesh may please an ear
tuned keenly to a more dissonant chord.

We call some acquisitions "spanking new"
because the slap lets out the infant's cry.
It plays the first note to come out of you.
So, should your lover ask you to let fly,

perhaps you shouldn't make them beg too long.
Sometimes the hand we need is loud and strong.

## THAT ELUSIVE KARMIC LESSON

My angels bide their time. When I have solved
the great dark puzzle of my broken past,
when I've internalized the insights of the spurned,
when I have paid my debt of poverty at last,

my guiding guardians will spread their phoenix wings
to blow away the smoke that blocks my eyes,
and I will see at last the thousand things
of my own doing that keep me despised,

and I can change my habits and become
the kind of soul success wants to embrace.
I tell myself that when I lack the sum
to simply eat, or maintain our small place,

it's easier to face this misery
if what's missing is something I can't see.

# THE HOARDERS

Collected by us, objects multiply
as if they were blessed with fertility,
as if accumulated on the sly —
oddball appliances bought suddenly

on impulse, which we'll likely never use;
books we might read someday, to teach us skills
we'll one day need because the daily news
predicts this trend or that will make our bills

decrease if we learn how to do ourselves
what we pay others for. Even the bookcase may
have given birth to propped-up dusty shelves
leaned on the wall in our cluttered hallway.

Then there's the junk we can't bear to let go;
we might need it if, well — you never know.

## THE PLATONIC MUSE PERSISTS

My love, our friends would never understand
if we should tell them you're a Muse to me
and otherwise that you are just my friend.
They would assume that sexuality

makes these poems possible, and what inspires
me to spill sonnets from my throbbing pen
must come from consummation of desires.
but I know now, love poems dry up when

the passion turns familiar, that age
does not just dull the body, but dilutes
the fever that makes love and jealous rage
blaze hot. Explored flesh no longer suits.

The mystery goes missing, and one way
to keep poems flowing is: keep it away.

# CLOSE TO THE BLAZE

On days after I see you, I sleep in.
It takes longer to build the energy,
to rise back from the deep unconsciousness.
And I'm reluctant to leave dreams of you,
or let go of the pillow I've clung to.
I've given you so much, there's little left
for living daily life, managing me.
When day starts, I don't know where to begin.

It's not that you demand a lot from me.
It's simply more intense to be alive
when I ride with you, though it's you who drive.
Your temperament's temperature runs hot,

and from yourself, what you expect is vast.
You want perfection, and you want it fast.

## HE WHO HESITATES…

I ask, how do you make a leap of faith?
Do you imagine there's a pool beneath
the cliff? Do you believe that landing safe
includes no broken bones, and your relief

is waiting on a boat to fish you out,
and free of charge? Does your God heal the brave
even when recklessness is all the act's about?
Must you prove you're worth the energy to save?

Are you the type who tests the ones you love?
Do you trust only in hard evidence?
Must calm be the reaction when you shove
a friend who tries to help against the fence?

Or do you take the gift in open hands
and trust the warmth for which the gesture stands?

# KINGDOMS AND DRAGONS

Komodo dragons will eat anything
alive — does this make them life's highest form?
Civilization is not natural.
It is a state we must create.
If there were any wildernesses left,
we would not be natural monarchs there.
It would be we who'd need to seize control,
and we could only do it armed with guns.
If we were naked as our enemies,
this is a contest we would surely lose.
So we are not born rulers. We invade
even the deepest forests and we think
when dragons are extinct, we will be kings.
But what's a king with no dragons to slay?

# STALKING THE DEVIL FISH

*A sonnet about writing*

I sit before my glowing screen and wait
for words to swim up from deep in my head,
or images to flit before my eyes. Great
effort would seem strained, so I relax instead.

I have metaphors for where this stuff resides.
Bodies of water seem closest to apt.
My subjects have minds of their own, besides,
and can dive out of sight if they feel trapped.

When we write about writing, that's a sign
that we feel stuck. Speak of the devil, that's
one thing they say, and so we do, design
for him a sensuous, appealing habitat.

Why set a trap with bait? Stories can thrive
only if they're authentically alive.

# THE CYCLE

You outlive interfering relatives.
You hold your tongue, you breathe, you count to ten.
You take a long walk when an argument
starts brewing. Now and then, you even give

in, let the bastards have their way this time.
They're old enough that you can simply wait
until the fellow with the cowl and scythe
shows up and raps three times upon the gate,

collects them like recycled glass and cans.
Then, when decisions rest in your own hands,
you and your children can enjoy the fruits
you owned at last when you donned those dark suits.

Your kids are grown. They're sure the suits will fit
them still, next time there's loot to inherit.

# PANDORA'S (CHATTER) BOX

No, not her vagina but her mouth you
must not open: out will come all of the
things she has held back, principally due
to her knacks for tact and diplomacy.

The facts will fall out of her mouth like bombs
and shrapnel from them will lodge in your crotch
and your own tongue will feel like it's all thumbs.
It won't be pretty; I refuse to watch.

The world is kept in orbit 'round the sun
by women keeping silent, biting down
on certain information better un-
revealed, so skin won't burn beyond light brown,

and you won't want to be blind once you've looked
to see your fried frown when your goose is cooked.

## PHELPS AT LAST

Between the memory of what he was
when he burned hot and hurled his words like rocks,
and what's left of him, lost in his last pause,
he'll drowse under a drugged fog, safe from shocks.
Nobody wants to hold him here. Children
he will not see wait for the news that he
hangs on no more. Forgiving anyone
would violate a long-held policy
that is more dear to him than his next breath.
He waits in a hospice, not his home; when
has he ever been at home? Waiting for death,
despising life and its temptations, then,
at last ends in relief, silenced by God,
warmed by a hotter flame beyond the sod.

# PHOENIX

*One has to pay dearly for immortality; one has to die several times while one is still alive.* — Friedrich Nietzsche

Large, large as an eagle, scarlet and gold,
the only one of its kind on the earth,
it lives to be 500 long years old.
It watches human kingdoms come and go, worth
little, framed as fading flashes in the blur
that is eternal history. Its brain
can hold no further memory at last;
its head begins to overheat. The strain
leaves it with energy for one last task —
to build from boughs its final nest and pyre.
Its eyes would start to glow; its feathers, smoke;
its body at last would burst into fire,
its flesh would fall to ash, its song would choke.
and from its rubble a new bird would rise,
ready to stock its blank brain through fresh eyes.

# POLITICS IN DOGTOWN

Fiercely, the Alpha dog defends his turf —
but bravely? That's debatable.
The danger threatens only in his mind.
His territory is quite safe.
The newer dog's tail wags; he smiles; he would
be friends, if he were just allowed to be.
Were he to relieve himself, it would mean
simple need, biology, not some claim
staked on an angry mental map.
But Alpha dog must bare his fangs, must growl,
and loud. He is convinced that others watch.
He must take this new dog down a notch.
After the struggle, damage will remain,
to evidence the drama in his brain.

# PROBLEM CHILD

The baby doesn't cry, and gets called "good,"
and learns the tone if not the meaning of the word;
"good" is someone who does just what others would
prefer he do, or worse, the silent bird

who just sits pretty on the branch and waits
without a squawk, who'd rather starve than cry.
The good baby grows up not rocking boats,
punches that clock, and wears a suit and tie

in that slow moving line that waits to die.
The "bad" baby may grab rough at the teat,
scream for attention, weep from a red eye,
decide when parents sleep that he must eat,

and generally defy the world's schedule of time.
But the "bad" baby requires — and so, inspires —
the nursery rhyme.

# RECONCILIATION

Imagining us sitting face to face
again, at some point after the storm's passed;
imagining us as we'll be — the place,
I picture just as vividly. The last
time we met, our eyes did not; such tries
seem vaguer in my mind when I compare.
I see each detail I will recognize
that night, as if it all happened before.
I feel the current flutter up my spine,
the pressure threatening to crack my chest;
I feel the hands clasped, sweating — yours and mine —
and afterwards, the great relief — the best.
All that, I feel and see, as if it's now;
but there's one question I can't answer: how?

## RED REVERIE

Sunsets compare unfavorably to you.
Their glow does not turn my face half so red
as picturing your face as I give head:
eyes closed in concentration, you demand your due,
the rhythmic swirl of love-struck lips and tongue.
I've never wanted anything so much
as this immersion in your taste, smell, touch,
your spasms when your salt seed floods my lungs.
I meant to paint a picture of romance,
and fell instead to dreaming what I crave
to do to worship you — my soul you save,
young God, each time you bless this humming dance.

I can't be bound by half so strong a lock
as your name carved on my soft heart and hard cock.

# UNCERTAINTY

1.
This struggle that I go through, though it seems
to be with you, who haunt my waking thoughts,
is more like an attempt to purge my dreams
of reoccurring images. The cost

in pure exhaustion from lost sleep's the same,
as if I'd woken up a dozen times.
It also seems a battle I can blame
not on you, but on my addicted mind.

This habit's hard to break, unlike a bone
that one could snap if one were mad enough.
If I could stop it with my will alone,
your call could come, and I would just hang up.

That's why I'm so afraid I'll hear from you.
Faced with your voice, I don't know what I'd do.

2.
Imagining that I run into you
amid a crowd of less intimate friends
who don't know we have fallen out again,
for good this time, it's all that I can do

to manage my blood pressure, I review
things I could say if you should speak, extend
a hand, or otherwise should go beyond
ignoring me. Could I be both polite and true?

I couldn't stand a little interview
where you'd ask how I am, I can't pretend
that I believe you care. You'd never bend
from your invulnerable height's cold view.

Anxiety anticipates the worst.
I only know I won't speak to you first.

# RESTRAINT

You sit beside me at the bar, beloved,
the deck's night air is cool, but you are warm.
I'd pat your thigh, a stolen touch I covet;
caress your back, and sample its strong form;

but we are not together in that sense tonight;
to my surprise, you've brought along a friend;
not that I would  presume to touch you is my right,
but after missing you two weeks, I'm near wit's end.

Affection is the last thing left this side of lust,
sometimes it tests what barriers persist —
and you are kind, and love vibrates between us,
and flows both ways, though one side stays unkissed.

I like your friend, who knew you as a child.
Beneath my manners, though, desire runs wild.

# AN EMPTY HOUSE IN ANYTOWN

That old house has a role in this small town.
Nobody buys it, though it's big and cheap.
You'd think someone at least might tear it down,
and use the land for something. It runs deep

beneath the ground, this reputation that
hangs on despite how many years have passed.
A dark thing happened there. Some say no rat
would even make its nest inside. The blast

the sawed-off shotgun made still echoes there;
the floorboards scream, like Maryanne must have.
The cops arrived too late. They say the stairs
are stained with blood forever, and old Dave

still shakes the walls with his humongous laugh.
Just pass the place; you'll feel you need a bath.

## FRIENDLY WITH DEATH

You tell yourself the leopard is a pet.
You raised her since she was a cub. She'll purr,
roll over on her back, and offer her
belly for rubbing. Sometimes, she will let

you kiss her forehead; then she'll lick your face.
Her black fur, soft and sleek, her yellow eyes
that shine like night-lights as in bed she lies
beside you — such a vision to embrace

intoxicates you like expensive booze.
You trust, if there were trouble, she would claw
off an intruder's face to save you. Awe
remains in you, of course, but when the news

reports another death, you turn away.
You live in drunken love from day to day.

# MICHELLE'S TRUTH

The last time I was in the hospital,
I was in group with this girl named Michelle.
Bandages were on her wrists, and she'd tell
us how she cut herself "to let the pain out," all

the while picking exposed scabs further up.
Something about her haunted me. She made
an awful kind of sense. I'd never had
the urge myself, yet I felt soon I'd pop

like a balloon, full of old pressures I'd
inhaled, held in — just couldn't let them go.
Maybe this girl knew what I didn't know.
My pulse was throbbing like a dammed-up tide.

That pounding drowns it out when docs explain
dull facts — like blood is blood, and pain is pain.

## SOMETHING SENSED ON SAMHAIN

Tonight, the veil between the worlds is thin,
between this world and that — this, and the next.
A kind of overhearing ushers in
awareness of dim things no one detects
on ordinary days. Fall falls away.
Winter's cold fingertips first find the spine.
We shudder when we sense the edges fray
between present and past. Voices remind
us of old conversations gone
from all but memory most of the year.
Tonight, it's more than echo going on.
Even what went unsaid may brush the ear.
The path may seem to end; everyday eyes
won't follow where it leads. But nothing dies.

# THE GREEN MAN

An image in the ornate metal grate
that guards the cellar window from kicked stones
betrays a man's face, gazing as he waits,
hidden among the leaves, silent, alone,

Where no one notices, presumes to judge
his motives. He remains mysterious.
from this safe vantage point, he'll never budge;
frozen forever in his role as just

observer — conscious, but uncivilized.
Amid his camouflage of vegetation
he can be a face with eyes
that don't betray his quiet cogitation.

Society thinks he's been left behind.
He smiles and keeps the secrets of his mind.

# HAIRCUTS

No wonder haircuts bring small boys to tears.
to sit that still for that long, a loud buzz
in your ears, a scratchy bib tied on, was
not much fun, as I recall now — five years,

maybe more, since I last suffered through it.
I got one often my whole life, and then,
one sunny day, I just decided "screw it."
I grabbed scissors and, like other harried men,

snipped off part of the ponytail. Never
looked back. Most people see you coming and
that's it. They don't look back, which is a grand
approach to things: you just ride the river.

There isn't time for haircuts any more,
when only grey locks gather on the floor.

# YOUNG NUN

She wears all black, although the weather's warm.
Her clothes conceal what curves defined her form.
A ceremony took a man's first name
and grafted it to her, so when there came
a visitor, she'd seem even more strange.
She knows there is a point to all this change,
but sometimes, now, she wonders who she is.
The girl is gone. Her mother calls her "Liz"
and it seems odd. It doesn't fit her
anymore, like these clothes half a size too
large. She fingers beads like vertebrae
and counts them too, to keep track of her prayer.
How many repetitions must she do,
like lifting weights, until she fills her day?

# SONNET TO SMOKE

Out in the cold, smoke clouds surround his head;
he's on the porch to spare his family.
So many smokers he has known are dead.
Now he exhales their ghosts reluctantly,
savors gruff voices coming back to him,
still rumbling low boasts and obscenities —
such vivid figures once, now growing dim,
fathers who left a fading legacy.
Unlike the trains on earth, the train to hell
must surely have a smoking car. He smiles
at that thought — rueful, but it rings a bell.
The thought of smoking after sex beguiles
no more. Our customs change; we live and learn.
Well, some of us do. Others slowly burn.

## PURROGATIVE

A cat decides the terms of where and when
love is allowed expression, and of how.
To pet or scratch or rub the belly, then,
are pointless should the cat decide, "not now."
You have a catlike grace, and when you bend,
you're in the mood to bend. You never bow
to anyone's idea of a friend
or lover's duty. Should your mood allow
an open moment, or a warm caress,
what you accept is also what you give.
The privilege of loving you is best
reserved for moments when you might forgive
fragility in me, and not feel pressed.
I wait for your clear signal. Then I live.

# NIGHT-BLOOMING

The deer come out to graze when the sun sets.
The whole herd fills the meadow at the edge
of town, and we observe an etiquette
of sorts; from a respectful distance, pledge
to come no closer, silently. One young
buck keeps his head up, keeps his eyes on us.
The rest munch grass as if we weren't there. Hung
low, the others' heads appear at rest. "Trust
in your hunger, it will tell the time,"
they seem to say, with their mouths full. You take
my hand in yours; no one sees but the buck.
No hunters here to sneer at the sublime.
Night is the time some blossoms open, so
we leave this scene. To our warm place we go.

# HYPOCRITE

You claim to follow Jesus, yet you hate;
he told you not to judge, lest you be judged;
though He said, "do unto others," you berate
whoever's presence unnerves you. No nudge

is needed to make you turn uglier.
You seethe if there's the slightest hint
that someone's crossed the rigid barrier
erected during your unpleasant stint

in child form, or by something Daddy said,
or pulpit platitudes Mom parroted.
You'll always be the first to throw that stone,
spit in that eye despite planks in your own.

You say there is no other way to live,
and every day do harm others forgive.

# HEARING FROM PAUL

He sends you a request to be your friend.
And you agree. Back when you both worked for the state,
you'd have lunch with him now and then.
You both wrote, and you could commiserate
about the frustrations of courting inspiration,
or the endless waits when stories you'd submit
would sit on some editor's desk, or the one
good idea you'd get sometime when you would sit
to stare down some blank page hoping to stun
some stranger some day. His blue-but-bloodshot
eyes would flash if you recalled a joke
you'd thought he might appreciate. Hot
fantasies might follow. But you broke
no rules by telling him the way you felt.
He had two sons who were about your age.
But you'd leave that dream on some unturned page.

# TOMCAT'S LAST HOWL

*Now you were tired, and yet not tired enough*
*—Still hungry for the great world you were losing*
*Steadily in no season of your choosing*
— Thom Gunn (1929-2004), "Lament"

He told his friends he had run out of "juice" —
his word for energy he used to write.
It took more booze and meth to get him loose,
more sex with rough young men who roamed the night.

He laughed about "gerontophiles" — young guys
who had a taste for tough old birds like him.
They'd come home with him after locking eyes
in twilit parks or dim-lit bars, where, on a whim,

he would decide to take the risk. It was
the one adventure left. He was still lean,
not only wired but wiry, with a buzz
igniting in his eyes that still-game gleam.

He still prowled, like the panther tattooed on his arm —
its recalled roar hiding his heart's last alarm.

# MOONLIT RETREAT

She walked into the water silently,
long after sunset briefly turned it red.
She stopped before the black murk reached her head
and stood neck-deep, embraced, but so coldly.

The lake had been her friend since she was small.
More faithful than most humans, it had proved.
It startled her a bit when something moved
across her shin. But she was safe. A call,

perhaps an owl's, reminded her to breathe.
She hadn't known where else to go to hide.
Her father wouldn't find her here. He'd tried
again. She felt that no one would believe

her if she told. She kept it clenched inside.
She'd swim across, but thought the lake too wide.

# UNSPOKEN THOUGHTS

You barge into the room, girlfriend in tow,
meet my eyes, wince, grin, stride up to me, and
shake my hand. Quietly, I say hello,
blocking my feelings, keeping my face bland,

or so I hope. You go and find a chair.
My anger rises in slow-mo. I ask
myself, of course, of all places, why here;
I'm sure you know this place is mine. A flask

of strong booze in my pocket would help now.
Then again, that likely is the last
thing I should do. Intoxication wowed
me into you in my too-reckless past.

As always, you look smug. You flow, and shake
a lot of hands. You glide smooth as a snake.

## UNITED WE FALL

A fog embraces us before we fall.
I can relax, knowing it cushions me.
A certain warmth is needed to enthrall
the air, to lend it soft solidity,
to make a curtain of it that my hand
can't quite grasp, though I feel it touches me
and lends a shimmer to my skin. A kiss
allows a borrowed taste of it as we
collapse, tangling together, on soft sand
that gave us ground to dance moments ago.
The boundaries that separated us
appear to melt, but only momentarily,
blurring the ego's version of identity
to lend us this fleeting impression that we fuse.
If both surrender, neither has to lose.

# SCARECROW

The birds, who can't appreciate the art,
peck at his propped-up sleeves, perch on his hat.
His face is painted on a burlap sack,
angry enough to cause a heart attack

but only to an old, old man whose brain
is addled by his age. A length of chain
hangs from his waist, a sort of belt; in back,
you see how bent nails hold him up. You'd hack

if you had allergies to hay, the stuff
that substitutes for flesh, but otherwise,
he'll pose no threat. The ones who made him put

no fear in him: no thoughts of evil eyes
that watched from underneath the bed; no rough
voice calling in the dark; no drop of blood.

# THE PLAN

Insurance will not pay until next month
although your heart demands a pill today.
Your blood pressure must wait, unless you want
to dip into your own pocket to pay.
The careful plan allows the company
to ditch their duty, and get off scot-free
for now. If you don't like it, just say "wait"
to your frail throbbing chest; tell your body
that bureaucracy trumps over cycles
driven by breath, muscles, blood; that paper
takes priority over mere flesh. Will
your heart to beat slower this week. Rapier-
point chest pain is one cost, or legal tender.
Grab your aching wallet and surrender.

# HUNTER

Hawk perches on a pole as cars hiss by,
imagining the sudden taste of blood,
the sound of tearing flesh, the tasty eye
plucked by his beak before the heart's last thud.

Hawk's mind is not on cruelty, but on love;
love of the senses flooded by the kill.
His victims are not real to him, above
it all, buoyed by a hungry thrill,

and so he will go soaring, peering down
on objects seen so small from such great height —
no closeness but in conquest, when the pound
of some small heart could strengthen his delight.

They only lived a moment in his head —
mere dots on a flat map, until he fed.

# WILD RABBITS

They live in peace behind the restaurant.
The zoning keeps out guns that cut life short.
The grass grows, and in sunlight they cavort
and multiply however much they want.

Only a hawk or cat would be so blunt
as to ignore laws human folks must sort
through to stay nameless in a crime report.
So long ears perk up. Swoop or pounce may haunt

their huddled dreams, although they burrow deep
in what the meek inherit. Philosophy
is only for the caged. Though cats may creep,

they go home for their meals. If you'd be free,
part of it is a dance with danger. So
patrons call it "wildlife" that they see.

# VARIETIES OF DANGER

The sidewalk gleams with grains of broken glass.
Even in sandals, you can cut your foot.
The woods may serve up stings, and even put
snakes in your path, hidden and toxic, as

a test of your alertness. But you pass
the city limits with more fear. It's not
some animal that terrifies you, but
the human predators. You haul your ass

in certain neighborhoods, where you believe
the hunger is the worst. But hunger hunts
the prosperous; locks and alarms attract

the challenged; so-called "security" may leave
a lot to some imaginations; wants
hurt worse than steps on a copperhead's back.

## UNRESOLVED

In this, my New Year's Eve delirium,
I treasure every loss that's haunted me;
I savor each mistake that struck friends dumb,
excuses executed brilliantly.
Some unpaid debts my mind can't even name
gnaw angrily at inner cellar walls.
A smoking pocket of forgotten blame
blind to its target clicks, chokes and forestalls.

It is a night for vows. I'll write a list.
I peer through steamy windows at pure dark.
Beyond my walls, an unforgiving mist
of blown snow goes on burying the park.
It drifts. My fingers drum, then make a fist
around my pen which moves, but leaves no mark.

# TOOKIE

*Stanley "Tookie" Williams, died December 13, 2005*[1]

The man convicted of multiple deaths
had arms too muscular to let the needle in.
His body was too strong to just quit breath —
no matter if his soul were stained with sin.

Supporters sang and carried signs outside;
he had become a death row *cause célèbre*.
Both Hollywood and victims' loved ones cried
against and for his death's collected debt.

To the end, the crimes he never would confess
would drive the governor to flex his muscles too.
Tension between the men became a test
of which deserved the louder ballyhoo.

The inmate's veins at last gave up his ghost.
To whose strength should we raise a glass and toast?

[1] Crips gang founder/anti-gang author Stanley "Tookie" Williams was executed at San Quentin for four murders committed during two 1979 hold-ups. Though demonstrators, some of them famous, gathered outside to protest his death, California Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger denied Williams clemency because he maintained his innocence and would not confess to his crimes. The lethal injection took an unusually long time to administer because Williams' arm was too muscular for the needle to be easily inserted.

## THE SURREALISTS

They made their way along the narrow ledge,
afraid to fall, but with a goal in sight.
Beyond it was a cave in which the edge
between this world and that glowed blue and bright.
To leave behind the everyday domain
where all they had were things they'd settled for;
in search of driving horizontal rain
to wash away the gaudy paint they wore —
all this, they had in mind before they stepped
too carelessly to see the now and here.
One fell, reached out for help, and so he kept
his young companion with him in his fear.
They plummeted, devoured by the abyss.
The world droned on, like nothing was amiss.

## THE SPELL OF THE RUINS

Here stand the crumbling remnants of a wall.
A long-demolished roof lets in the sky.
Decapitated statues standing by
once served as sentries till they gave their all

to whatever the place stood for. Recall?
No one who can remains alive. So why
can we still sense some power here? Don't try
to dodge the shadows that still fall.

To look at these remains, replace the lack
with what imaginations recognize.
We all know how it was, though how we know

remains a mystery our minds attack
without enthusiasm. Close your eyes
and let all your defenses go.

# THE LEGACY

I own a house where I don't feel at home,
left to me by a relative now dead,
where mouths would rarely kiss but often foam,
and all seemed black and white when we saw red;
where tenderness would always have its price;
resentment would go hand in hand with love;
and each mistake we made would turn to ice,
reminding us no good was good enough;
with walls not just around, but in between;
with windows curtained off against the sun;
yet every tiny nuance would be seen,
and noted like one more debt left undone.
I am the king there now; tight is my crown.
If not for neighbors, I would burn it down.

# SOBRIETY

To keep it to myself — this flesh that aches
to brush against another's flesh too soon;
to keep from having that one drink it takes
to get me shouting curses at the moon;

to keep from loving anybody flawed,
who might disrupt my precious peace of mind;
to keep my cool reserve from being thawed;
to keep from being caught, and left behind;

to keep from breathing in the world's foul germs,
and getting sick enough to need a cure;
to keep from feasting on dead meat like worms,
and keep my body tight and trim and pure;

to keep to this clean path — now that's ambitious!
If only it weren't quite so repetitious.

# THE PRICE OF INSOMNIA

I lay awake all night, then slept till three.
The damn Internet wouldn't let me on.
I'm still disoriented from my dreams,
and virus tricks prove all control is gone.

I can't get started, just like the used car.
I can't accomplish half of what I'd planned.
The screen drags me to ads for these bizarre
appliances Mom wouldn't understand.

The mailbox fills with bills I can't afford.
My bowels repeatedly rush me upstairs.
The bank tells me card interest rates have soared.
Too bad the payment can't be made in prayers.

If going back to sleep would help, I'd try.
Last night, I couldn't. Hmm. I wonder why.

# FINAL GIRL

The killer will not get around to her
until his winning streak runs out of steam.
The carcasses, in which her friend's souls were,
she'll stumble on — no, no, it's not a dream.

A wound will wake her up. She'll start to run.
She won't care about who the killer is.
No, what he is, and how he has his fun,
now drive her actions just as hard as his.

She'll scan each room she hurtles through to find
whatever weapon-like objects may lie
within quick reach. She has virginity
on her side, though no morals cross her mind.

To live, at all, pre-empts questions of how,
as her running time nears its ending now.

# CHILD BEAUTY QUEEN

Tiffany's nine. Her hair extends her height
by half a foot, piled high in sculpted curls.
Her eyes seem huge. False lashes and blue lids
enhance the luminous come-hither look
disturbing from a face so young. Hands on
her hips, she poses like a stripper, as
the lights gleam on her smile — elaborate
dental work replacing baby teeth with
false. Her fingernails are long and painted.

Her dress? Red as a flashed-on neon sign,
low cut, though there are no breasts yet to see,
and short enough to show most of her legs,
in fishnet stockings (also red). The crowd
applauds. Her mother wishes rivals dead.

## THE AFFAIR (A CROWN OF SONNETS)

We were attached; you knew, but you denied
that I could be the end of your long search.
But as for me, I knew I was in church,
or thought I did. I knelt, discarding pride
and dignity and old beliefs. I tried;
in all my years of sad, frantic research,
I hadn't found a way to feel allied;
even my parents left me in the lurch.
You had a family, a hiding place
where you could feel — if somewhat fettered — safe.
You had a past you wanted to forget,
and longings you ached with, but couldn't face.
We knew each other at first sight, yet gave
in slowly — helpless, and with some regret.

Slow, helplessly, our fear and our regret
proved too weak to hold back what felt so strong.
You burned for what I'd give, but thought it wrong.
Or so you said. Yet, soon after, you let
me do the things you'd always wanted. *Get*
*while you can, love who you're with,* some song
from your wild past led you this far along,
perhaps, and I became your drooling pet.
I loved you like a dog, expecting just
a fond stroke in return, a sometime walk,
a bone or table crumbs; I'd beg for those.
I felt, if long unused by you, I'd rust,
and you seemed happy your new tool could talk.
You told me hidden things — true, I suppose.

You told me hidden things — true, I suppose,
of young days when you broke the law for fun,
of women and men conquered on the run,
and how much you'd been loved by some of those.
My lust grew with each secret you disclosed.
I felt blessed to be the next in line, un-
done by your exciting life, your eyes that stun,
your rambling voice, the smell of you so close.
My family had always let me down;
I didn't see why yours should feel betrayed.
I wasn't fazed by lies you'd tell another.
You were the man I couldn't be, a crown
bright on your handsome head. And when we played,
this only child was suddenly called brother.

This only child was suddenly called brother,
euphemism though it was. I became
your sidekick, like in buddy films; no blame
followed me here from childhood streets. *Smother*
*the past,* I thought. *God, at last, another*
*chance.* I was a new man, I'd discover
kingdoms other men had always known. Blur
that those days were, I couldn't see how tame
you'd quickly made me, how I'd shelved my needs
to gladly service yours. An act of love,
it was for me; you wanted just a ball.
Guard down, I'd blurt the wrong words, and the seeds
they planted bore new fear in you. Above
all else, this had to stay a game you'd call.

Because this had to stay a game you'd call,
you made up rules that I'd already bent.
You put me through a period like Lent;
each time I'd ask to see you, you would stall.
The weeks dragged by; I feared, too, now, that all
would turn to nothing, that you would invent
a stronger rationale for time unspent
together, for "practical reasons." Wall
after wall was thrown up, sure enough. You
said weeknights and weekends were bad, gave
no hope, only unending puttings-off.
Though none of it rang anything like true,
you said, "Don't take it personally." Be brave,
I told myself, until I'd had enough.

I told myself, until I'd had enough,
that what shone in your eyes belied your words.
It was your love, not mine, that had incurred
this act that you put on of talking tough.
You spoke to me of friendship — all that stuff
about how you "liked me a lot," and hurt
was not what you intended. A bird
in your chest fluttered, felt the cage; wings shoved
against cold metal bars that would not yield.
It didn't matter much how bad I felt —
you'd say one thing, but cling to your own way.
My anguish could no longer be concealed,
and time dragged on. I watched what I'd built melt.
I, too, was family you could betray.

I, too, was family you could betray.
Close, yes, but never close enough to break
through that last wall of coldness, maybe shake
you up enough that you'd cave in and pay
the price for what you stole. But you'd just say
you cared, then act as if you didn't. Take,
you'd do with relish, but make no mistake —
you wouldn't give an inch to save my day.
Your actions didn't speak of any care,
although you knew my pain was deep — it seems
on love repressed, not much can be relied.
No loss would draw it out, no tears, no screams.
We were attached; you knew, but you denied.

# UNTITLED

*(first attempt at a sonnet,1984)*

You still don't know, and I won't tell yet. I
will revel in the innocence of this.
What you don't know won't hurt me, and the bliss
of which I'm ignorant is best a sigh

left lingering where longings hide, within
fond fantasy, the place where longings live
the longest. I look on you as mystics in
the state of grace see God's face, God's forgive-

ness; your skin, gleaming beyond reaching. But
I know, from what you've told me, of your wound
within — deep, much like mine, the troubling cut
made on your mind when tyrants called your tune.

We have both been laughed at, left out, lost and poor.
But of this bond between us, I am still not sure.

# EPITAPH FOR QUENTIN

*Charisma is the ability to influence without the use of logic.*
— Quentin Crisp

Quentin was a very gentle man.
His voice and hands were soft; his hair was white
with streaks of pink dyed in. There was a light
around him that protected him from hands

That meant him harm, although he'd have denied
such things could be. Every man was "Mister"
to him, every woman "Miss" or "Mrs."
There was more to him than manners — he tried,

though, to embody etiquette. Feelings,
he would say, are just a luxury one
can't afford, at least beyond a certain
age. Yet his highest art was sparing them.

He lived in one room that he never swept.
When he passed from us, even the dust wept.

## WHEN I MET GWENDOLYN BROOKS

My job was to help her sell her books.
I sat beside her at the folding table.
I made change while she met admiring looks
and signed her name as much as she was able.

Where I sat intruded on her aura.
It wouldn't work if I'd sat far away.
Somebody'd brought a huge bouquet of flora,
which someone else had quickly whisked away.

No room here for anything but books. She
signed mine, "To My Colleague" — what a thrill!
The line was long. I thought, perhaps, that we

might chat when it was over. But until
the place was closing, she was occupied.
I'm honored she brushed by me in her stride.

## ON REFLECTION

A young man who admired the distant past
perused a book he'd found under some dust.
He knew the light around him wouldn't last.
He knew what he could touch, he couldn't trust.
He looked among the shadows and the mist
for faded faces he might recognize,
for obstinate old legends that persist
for generations, though the story lies.
Truth, yellowed, crumbled at his fingertips,
long paled beside what he'd learned to believe.
He read aloud. What passed between his lips
described things that he'd never seen, yet grieved.
He was the keeper of a doorless key.
Years later, he is still hidden in me.

# PARANOIA

No, I don't live in fear; fear lives in me.
It follows me around and dogs my days.
What triggers it, I may not hear or see,
but my imagination has its ways.
A stranger's glance misread, a laugh nearby,
no conversation heard — just tones of voice;
convinced the subject's me, moved to reply,
I make enemies as if I have no choice.
A dying bee on autumn's windowsill —
no strength to sting, it flounders in the cold.
Afraid, I raise my newspaper to kill
this creature that already won't grow old.
That fluttering on the periphery
must be a threat; I take it personally.

## DEFENSIVENESS

This is a glass pane shattered by a fist,
through which invading wind can surge unscathed;
this is the green tattoo that shouts, RESIST,
but brands the man who wears the word a slave.
This is the size of fear, the shape of hate,
the voice of silence that denies them both —
we build a higher wall and bar the gate,
but, nonetheless, realities encroach.
There is no place to hide from what we feel,
no mask our shaded gaze can't recognize.
The seeds we bury fester, then congeal,
then bear their bitter fruit before our eyes.
This is the secret everyone can see
too late; that is the final irony.

# LOCKER

It was the only private place in school —
regrettably, too small to crawl inside.
The padlock meant you had some space to hide
what private stuff you'd dare keep in a cruel

environment: the face for which you were a fool,
taped to the door; a notebook where you lied
in secret to yourself; the knots you tied
trying to cast some sort of spell, which you'd

believe in if it worked. You'd go at times
when no one came nearby, no one could see
to laugh at, or describe, your hidden things.

You'll live through this and look back. Drinks with limes
will make you laugh at this dull memory.
You tell yourself that now, while the name stings.

Because I was a gawky kind of guy,
with thick bifocals and burgeoning zits;
because my laughter was a tone too high,
and I, a size that no known clothing fits;
because the music I loved wasn't cool,
much like the books I read, and things I said;
because we were all kids, and kids are cruel,
and, if you don't exactly fit, you're dead —
I didn't rise to top the class like cream;
I didn't study and apply myself;
I didn't even try to make the team,
or pave my way for future ease and wealth.
I cherished all they pressured me to hide —
and refused to prove them right by suicide.

# A QUIET MEMORY

We rode bikes on the boardwalk, Dad and I,
on early mornings, while the crowd still slept.
We shared the time much like a secret kept —
that truce was possible. It was a guy
thing, one might say, not mentioning that Mom
was not in sight. Well, not in hearing was
more to the point. Gulls only broke the calm —
gulls and the softly crashing tide, because
Mom wasn't here, could fill our ears with round,
warm tones. Even the wheels were mute — no card;
no squeak; just turning without sound.
To go long without talking was not hard.
There was no need for any other noise.
There could be peace out there, for just us boys.

# BIRTH OF FRANKENSTEIN

Lightning awakened me. I was strapped down.
In many places, I felt stitches itch.
I smelled of brimstone. Every muscle twitched.
The cry, triumphant, "IT'S ALIVE!" soon drowned

in thunder, a few steps behind the flash.
Then his face looking down at me, wild-eyed
and sweaty. Handsome, though. I heard a sigh
emerge from me. He smudged this thumb with ash,

drew something on my forehead. This was my
mark of the unbaptised; though my life spark
came from God's sky, my sky was cold and dark.
My future would hold only misery.

I was not his child, but his creation.
Product disappoints imagination.

# JAPANESE SONNET

A stream between two
green slopes. Ducks float; the current
carries them along,

effortless. The blue
flowers on the bank weren't
there last week. Fish throng

under the clear view;
silver flashes only lent
to eyes — blink; they're gone.

The sun reaches through
early spring chill, intent on
making colors strong.

All things, moving at their pace,
bring this moment to this place.

## THE MARK OF KUAN YIN

She sits like moonlight on the lotus leaves
as they float on the pond. She has no weight —
how heavy can a vision be? Her fate
was not determined when the king sent thieves

to cut her down. Her spirit, some believe,
stayed here, caught by the cries of throngs whose great
grief her care now relieves. She brings a state
of grace, they say; delusions can't deceive

her devotees. Her robe is white. Her mind
is clear, so she has clarity to spare.
Awake to her, and she can guide you where

no hurt is left, and everyone is kind.
Take this last pain — tattoo her image there.
Commit to an eternal love affair.[2]

[2] *Kuan Yin.* Guanyin is the East-Asian Goddess of Mercy, derived from Buddhism. Often depicted as both female and male, Guanyin is a transcendent symbol of kindness and mercy. She is also among the Taoist "immortals."

# TOWARD TWILIGHT

The agitated air grabs at your hat
and so do you, to keep from giving chase.
A leather jacket holds your warmth in place,
as you run errands, tend to this and that.

The sun will soon be gone. The shadows, flat
now, will envelop the whole place.
For now, the sense of safety we embrace
comforts the runner and the sleepy cat

stretched out on someone's windowsill. You pat
your pocket to make sure steel rings encase
the keys you need to enter what safe space
you call your own, though you just rent your little flat.

Dusk settles. The cat goes out on the prowl.
Somewhere nearby, you hear an untamed howl.

# PERSISTENCE

Some cloudy night, should all the world stand still,
and brown grass thirst for promised storms in vain;
should grief induce paralysis of will,
so even sleep would feel like too much strain;
should some loss loom so largely in your view
that there are no horizons in your mind —
no distances across which maybe you
could hope to leap, if you were not so blind;
should anything occur, or not occur,
upon which every other thing depends,
and no star bide its time beyond the blur
'til wish and answer seem more than loose ends;

should you see all of this and still remain,
you might, at last, be ready for the rain.

# AN INCESSANT, QUIET CRAVING

For now I have no idea what to say,
although I know my heart throbs endlessly
with longing for you when you're far away
or even when you're right in front of me —

you're like a masterpiece in a museum;
you're exquisite, but you stand outside time
unless we touch, unless there's that connection.
Oh, worship suits you — oh, you are sublime;

but face it, we got tired of that with God,
though his beauty would never meet our eyes.
Not that my role of worshipper seems odd;
you're that magnificent, that rare a prize;

and soul still reaches though the flesh is far.
But I ache for a man's warmth,
    not some burnt-out star.

## BLIND WITNESS

The story has two sides, but only one
is all you need to go half-cocked and tell
a stranger off. Your friend's version is gospel;
no need for your own investigation.

Your friend's acquaintance, you dismiss — undone,
whatever good he may have sown. To hell
with him. Meanwhile, your friend can unravel
at the speed of gravity. He can run

downhill to meet his own demise. His doom,
he draws from many sources. You defend
his character no matter what. The end

is no surprise to those who took the room
to watch from a safe distance. You pretend
away; duck shrapnel; let the last fact bend.

# CLOSETED

Only relaxed in shadows, you retreat
into a scene familiar from your youth.
It was darker then. Broken into neat
compartments, choosing which part of the truth

you'd share with whom, spared from the harsh, cold glare
of even strangers seeing who you were,
you wore a suit and closely cropped your hair.
You rarely bared your soul, hoping to blur

your unkempt hungers from the shallow sight
of those who live bedazzled in blunt day.
Even at night, you wore a mask of tight
features that wouldn't give your lusts away.

Now, in a climate more open than then,
you still pass unseen by attractive men.

# DESPONDENCY

Don't be quick to dismiss an old cliché;
you know why people speak of "heavy hearts."
The feeling in that phrase describes, today,
precisely how you feel — a weight that starts

between the shoulders, and spreads outward, like
spilled liquid that soaks through a paper towel,
or flames that leap out from a lightning strike.
Soon your whole body knows, if you swim now,

you'll drop straight down, as buoyant as a brick.
Look up, and, out of reach, the air and light
would taunt you like a carrot on a stick.
But being at the bottom would seem right.

Sometimes the obvious evokes things best;
you feel like there's an anchor in your chest.

# DREAM-WORLD

My poverty is primary, but I
possess a rich imagination. On
occasion, a scent or a sensation
triggers motion in my mind, and I fly

in a waking dream on a vacation,
beyond what feeble finances can buy.
A lifetime in another century,
perhaps, when there is more civility,

where a good poet can be an icon.
Prosperity would not require a war.
The government would never interfere
with private pleasures. No one would keep score

of who's "worth more" than whom. We'd have clear air.
And friends would be competitors no more.

# GRIEF SONG

You wander down the beach, drunk on the sound
of one song as it plays repeatedly
inside your skull, stuck in your memory.
It drones no matter how loud the waves pound.

The sand is white. The winter dwindles. Free
of other people, whose inhibiting
awareness of us ruins everything,
you celebrate their non-proximity

and leave your clothing in a heap. You sing
out loud the raucous anthem that your brain
is saturated with, like a red stain
polluting a white dress. You are the king

this empty place embraces at the end.
Sing louder. Do not think of your dead friend.

# HAUNTED

The friends you left behind outnumber those
still in your orbit, but you never meant
to let them disappear. They, too haven't remained
in touch with you. But you suppose

you'd find hurt in their eyes, and so you close
your own, feeling your way across more distant absence.
Yet, struck by some slight incident,
you think of things you might say if you chose

to write them down. Perhaps you'll send a card. But
there's the risk of getting no reply.
Besides, it's not the right occasion. Yet

you wonder, now, if those feelings are hard.
You talk yourself out of another try.
Uncertain, you drop what you can't forget.

# HIGH-HORSE SONNET

The way this anger follows you around,
relentlessly still chewing at your ear,
You'd think the target for it was right here,
and you yourself incurred that grating sound.

You've gotten every detail memorized
that made up the now long ago offense.
You drone each one as if your brain were dense
and only repetition would suffice

to get the message through. However, she
who slighted you has never heard a word.
Your silent absence may betray a blurred
impression that there's some discrepancy.

If you should see her, would you even speak?
You peer through clouds from your frustration's peak.

# IMPROVISATION

Relentless stress from living hand to mouth
propels you like a drug you can't afford.
With barely funds for food, you cry "O Lord!"
when your just-filled fridge suddenly goes south.

A trash bag full of ice, a cardboard box —
a temporary cooler till next check.
Then the computer won't restart. The ex-
pert friend you call for help, this time outfoxed

by the machine, apologizes. Phone
calls come from bill collectors. Your best prayer
makes no visible impression on the air.
Excuses stall, again, the debtor's drone.

You stagger from one crisis to the next.
Improvisation blooms from the perplexed.

## AFTER RILKE'S
## First Sonnet to Orpheus

Orpheus drops a seed in your ear when he
sings. It sprouts into a tree that towers
over you, takes root deep in your head. The birds
stop singing, squirrels stop their chatter — it's not
because they fear this miracle,
or even that their little voices can't compete.
All of nature listens with you.

Till now, your ear has been a flimsy hut,
shaken by noise, pierced by the slightest breeze, its
dirt floor bare and seeming barren. But
now a temple flowers there, immense — yes,
magnificent, where you could lose yourself
among the echoes. Though it buries you,

you don't mind being pressed into the ground,
feeling through roots the vibrations of sound.

# AFTER LORCA'S
## Sonnet of The Letter

*(From "Sonnets of Dark Love")*

My love is like a living death within,
when all I have is hope to hear your words.
The you I bear in mind fades like cut flowers —
I'll lose it if my self-love wears too thin.

Air lasts forever. Stone's turned hard and cold.
It does not know, nor suffer in, the night.
Nor does my inmost heart need sweet, wet gold
dripped from the distant moon, though it gleams bright.

But I persist, endure my aching veins,
tiger and dove at war around my waist —
my lilies suddenly surprise with thorns.

Fill my mad night with words, that I may turn
insanity into serenity.
Lest my soul's pitch black night endlessly burn.

# THAT OTHER CONSCIOUSNESS

When you jump off the board, the surface hurts,
like an all-over instant body slap.
Unless you pause first, strike the pose of blade,
and pierce the water, hands forming a point.

Then, it's as if you part a curtain, and
pass through into another atmosphere.
There, you can hold your breath and look around.
The singing of stung skin will not distract.

Somebody must have taught you, someone you
could trust, the knack of trading in one world
and entering another one. Lucid
dreaming is a bit like this. There is no

wall, merely a membrane — so you slip through.
It isn't solid there. Neither are you.

# THE ASSUMPTION

The snow falls softly all around the church,
full though it's midnight on a holiday.
There must be a consensus now — no way
they'll understand your never-ending search
to feed your hungers, fleeing your caged perch
to try a cold, dark sky, and find your way
without a fixed star. You know what they'd say:
they need to see you on your knees; besmirch
the faith, they'd call it, should you find your own.
They light their candles, sing their hymns, embrace
on cue, smile brightest at the ones they hate.
They call this lying truce "the kiss of peace."
Community includes them all by fate;
born into it — its laws, written in stone.

# THE HAUNTED FLUTE

There is a man who has a wooden leg
that, if removed, can be played as a flute.
He lost his leg to diabetes. Root
of all his trouble? One sweet bite, he'd beg

for more. Now he makes due with a warm tune,
though dancing is a distant memory.
He fills each note with breath — like priests, with clay,
made Golems to protect tribes at full moon.

His melodies move only people, though,
and they just hear him playing through a wall.
He can't play if you look at him at all.
His goal is just to bring to mind a blue

pang for things cherished once, but vanished now —
what things you loved, but lost hold of somehow.

## THE INTERPRETER

She has appointed herself messenger
between you and third parties she won't name.
She'll tell you what was said, but not by whom.
so critics stay anonymous through her.

The trouble is, what cauldron she can stir
may hold only ingredients that came
from her own recipe. And so the blame
for her own words she might simply confer

on someone made invisible, perhaps
not real. How cleverly her scheme leaves you
off balance, arguing with the unseen.

And anything you say she quickly traps,
and it's her cloth your answer is strained through.
Insist that what folks say, they say to you.

## THE SILENT LURE OF RECOGNITION

You move your feet as if you know the way,
though you have never seen this place before
except perhaps pictured in books, on maps, and may-
be even in some hazy dream. The war,

till now, has kept most Westerners away.
The country of your dreams, you must explore,
despite what politics may not or may
decree about it on the public floor.

We live in private first. Our loves arise
inside us of their own accord, and damn
all borders we did not create. Our eyes
receive what strikes the chord our souls demand.

Although our first impression wasn't real,
we'll know no peace until our own hands feel.

## THE WEEK IN REVIEW

Let's see: what do you have to say today?
You open up your head and peer inside.
So much went on this week that your brain's fried.
You need to sort the wreckage from the fray.

Your version of disaster's not so bad.
Nobody has to die. Computer crash,
your masterpieces lost; out with the trash,
the jotted number of a date you had.

A small snub starts a new decades-long grudge.
You know you shouldn't say things you don't mean.
You feel your heels dig in, and you forget

you have no robe or gavel, but you judge.
A word that might be playful turns obscene.
It looks as though Hell Week's not over yet.

# TWO PENETRATIONS

The needle's sting precedes the stream of stars
that fall and scatter in your vision's field.
A sudden heat thuds through your veins; you yield
to the invading thrust of something hard

and groan with pleasure and some pain. Unsealed,
the brown glass bottle at your nose sends large
waves of a dark throb through your pounding heart,
and spins your brain until it has revealed

How easily all inhibitions drop.
Then you thrust back, opening further depth.
You have no clue what has invaded you.

Something too small to see, and unknown yet,
will dim defenses you do not suspect
protect your life. A steep toll will come due.

# WITNESSING

The poet stands apart from everyone
because that distance is required to see,
or so the poet says. What wound would stun
a person into such withdrawal, we

can only speculate. Perspective is,
perhaps, worth isolation, but the view
captured does not seem all that cold. If his
distance pains him worse, the song will strike you

as one with its notes bent blue, emerging
in a broken voice. Though meaning hides, tone
will ring true, because this brutal calling
will subvert all lies. He feels the truth bone-

deep. It blazes out of him like light
from lava heated beyond red, to white.

## SECRET ADMIRER

You tell me that I am not aging well
and that, in that sense, I am just like you.
You laugh. You know what you said wasn't true.
You get there first and deprecate yourself

before the other guy can strike. You're not
aware that you awaken and arouse
a longing I'd be better off without;
I turn my head when my cheeks get too hot.

I keep my eyes from lingering. I put
my passion in my poems. And you may
be right about the way I age. The day
is gone when I would dare to set my foot

on such a risk-laden terrain as that
where inconvenient love might hang its hat.

# OVERTAKEN

Sometimes the blood screams to be free. It pounds
against the walls that hold it in. The surge
feels good; you take it for a sudden urge
to burst upon the scene, perhaps confound

acquaintances with shows of strength. You stride
outside, instead of giving it a rest.
You don't suspect your own blood might suppress
you. You brush "that fool doctor's" words aside.

embarrassment is not what makes you flush.
Your friends all ask if anything is wrong.
Who's this opponent sitting on your chest?

You can't see him, but he feels big and strong.
Somebody dials 911, says to rush.
For the first time, you think maybe that's best.

## YOUR SILENT REPLY

You scatter ashes in a secret place,
and so you say goodbye, but silently.
You burned the letter; its delivery
confirmed suspicions you'd tried to misplace

for quite a while. But inwardly, you knew.
Denial dulls hurt, but only goes so deep.
What we can't face can still disturb our sleep
though we forget the dreams on waking, too

distracted by the duties of the day.
Though we get up and run, we don't get far.
It acts on us, the fact of how things are,
despite the things people don't say.

So you leave ashes floating on the breeze,
and a faint smell of smoke among the trees.

## ABOUT RESOLVING

You make a resolution, take a vow
that you'll accomplish something — and this year.
The custom celebrates the shifting, now,
of digits on your calendar, the mere

replacement of one with the next.
It's one way we pretend to organize
the onrush of events that might perplex
or even terrify us otherwise.

If you decide to act and follow through,
if you knock down a certain barrier,
if you change how you look or what you do,
convince some girl that you should marry her,

you'll blend in better with folks as a Whole,
share in the great consensus of control.

# TO A DYING PET

*In loving memory of Rosie, our pet rabbit,*
*who passed away on Sunday, October 14, 2012.*
*She lived with us for seven years.*

You lie still on your side. You may be gone.
I can no longer see you breathe. The eye
that I can see is open still — but on
or off its light, I can no longer try
to guess. I have no clue. I keep as qui-
et as I can. I hope to let you go
in peace. I don't want to attempt to buy
a moment more of life for you;  I know
there's nothing here for you but suffering.
Your body has worn out its motor; to make
you hang on would be cruel. So I don't cling
to more caresses for your fading sake.
You know I love you. I have told you so.
Now I must know enough to let you go.

How to feel peaceful, when you haven't known
the calming comfort of a mother's love?
How can you trust a reassuring tone
of voice, when sudden rage often would hover

behind any seeming smile? In childhood,
every question was a test, and failing
meant sure punishment. But if you did good
work, to draw attention set her railing.

Sitting in the corner, silent — only that
would do. You mustn't even breathe too loud.
The merest glimmer would attract a cloud;
lightning would follow. Now, you wear a hat

indoors and out. Your voice alone commands
respect. At a safe distance, listeners stand.

# ANOTHER APOLOGY

At times when the world crashes in on me —
blow after blow rained down in a short time —
and what little composure you might see
drains from my face, and I protest the crime

as if it were a cataclysmic thing,
I never mean to blame the hurt on you.
The fury I still carry from each sting
that made old injuries accrue

just pains me like the ghost of a lost limb.
The family that crippled me is dead now,
but a scarred man can still feel them pelting him
when small stones avalanche. And this is how

the damage manifests itself today.
Please stand back till the fit passes away.

# FROM THE DAILY OBSERVER

A man sits on his front stoop in the sun,
the suit he wears, rumpled and stained.  He ought
to still be at his job at this hour, un-
less unemployed (like biddies who watch what-

ever occurs on this block). If he quit,
or failed to show up, drunk — well, soon enough,
the block will know. He lifts his tie till it
escapes his collar, still noosed, slides over rough

stubble on its way into the air, then
pulls it off and pockets it, his breathing freer.
His top button was never shut, but, when
the knot obscured it, no one knew but her.

Speaking of her, now she leans out the door,
says something. He nods. They've kept their rapport.

# THIS GIFT IS NOT A LOAN

To ask for help is so embarrassing
that we will put it off till it's too late.
We'll pray, because we think God is so great,
He'll always understand. Humans, we shrink

to match our own sad measure, and assume
that they would do as we would do — help, but
begrudge what we have loaned. We fear that doom
will surely stalk the friendship now. We've cut

ourselves, and shown the wound that labels us
as weak and needy. We accept the gift
with shame, though love made us choose if
we'd chance the asking, and said "yes" in trust.

What's given in love is given freely;
no need to think of it as "Charity."

## PERFECTIONIST

His creative process is no fun.
He cannot bear the stage of hit or miss.
It must be flawless — not just move, but stun.
To see it halfway there would make him hiss.

An old model won't do. He likes them tight.
Why try to capture anybody's flaw?
Each day has just five minutes of good light.
He must attack it then, or not at all.

The best materials, he can't afford.
The project must just wait until he can.
On certain days, he notes, even the Lord
would let things rest. Of course, he must demand

exactly the right angle of the sun.
That's why his perfect work is never done.

# TIGER DREAM

Recurrently I dream of public parks
Where tigers run free. No one notices.
No one gives a second glance. No eye sparks
with fear. The tigers, too, seem unimpressed

by all the people lost in their routine.
One lies across a bench, flicking his tail
at flies; another rolls across a green
expanse of grass down by the nature trail,

ignores a lone straggler who wanders off.
There's no hint here of predator or prey.
A dog chases a Frisbee. A girl's laugh
betrays she's just a teenager at play.

The tigers seem well-fed in these calm dreams.
The park's no jungle. All is tame, it seems.

# SWIMMING TO MALJARDIN

*Maljardin is a Caribbean island whose name, in French, means "Garden of Evil." Only poisonous vegetation will grow there. Hence its complete lack of any wildlife.*

The island in the distance may not shine
but if you give up swimming there, you'll drown.
No other land in sight, no boat around
to wave down so they might throw you a line.
It's true a shark might clamp down on you first;
you might cramp up too terribly and sink;
it's true, exhaustion has you on the brink
of pushing past the point your heart might burst;
but life is breath, no matter how much stress
you have to go through to keep gulping air.
The body can defy much wear and tear
if breath itself depends on such duress.
You don't know how you got here. But that shore
urges you on like nothing has before.

# LAST SONG FOR LINDA

*In memory of Linda Cohen, brilliant classical guitarist/composer, and beloved teacher.*

The dead girl's music plays on in your head;
it haunts you, as they say, and not because
her spirit does, although her eyes could thaw
a banker's heart, her laugh turn men's cheeks red.

She was a kind soul with a cutting wit.
Her spark was so bright, when it was snuffed out —
and suddenly — we couldn't see without
its glow. We groped blind in a lightless pit

until our salt-stung eyes adjusted. Cancer,
someone said, quick-spreading, undetected
till it was too late. A smoke cloud drifted
through the room and took her — like a dancer

swept away when it cut in. Still the tune
plays on, the steps play out, though she is gone.

## SOME YEARS, THE SHADOW LIES

Can this, the end of winter, be a metaphor
as well as a cold fact? The day's as grey
as every recent predecessor,
though the sun sets a bit later. Yet, say
life's looking more hopeful, and you're not quite
lying — but it's not that simple. The path
out of the darkness may end in a bright
place, but has potholes that derail your craft;
you can't sidestep what you can't see. Go
on, you think, but if you break a leg,
no matter what the actors say, snow
will just bury you, no matter how you beg.
Your friends, indoors, won't hear your cries and come.
Each year, the spring thaw comes too late for some.

## TO AN ARTIST FRIEND I HAVEN'T SEEN IN DECADES

My beautiful old friend, some days I miss
you more than others. Age has moved me far
out of your orbit. Wouldn't think a star
could lose its magnet grip on me, but dis-

tance disappeared me from the world
I once inhabited, which now seems like
the unreachable sky, though it's just I,
not you, who can't reach, as I have been hurled

far from the hot center of things, to where
some real people retire. But am I real?
Some people nearby wouldn't really feel
I am, although the evidence is there.

In their world, we are just the stuff of myth.
They're next to me, but they're not who I'm with.

# ONE SPARK

It enters like a germ borne on the air,
not triggered by touch — yet — but just by sight.
The man turns as he talks. A patch of hair,
there on his neck, looks soft against white

winter sun-starved skin. You picture kissing
it to warm him. And he laughs, smiles; he likes
the joke you made. He reaches out and shakes
your hand. He has to go. Tomorrow brings

another workday down on him. You know
that tune. You are infected now. Desire,
if you allow it and don't douse its fire,
will sink its roots in you and start to grow.

Indulge this impulse, and your peace of mind
will only be one thing you leave behind.

## THE SIMMERING

One day this old volcano will erupt.
The villagers who live, oblivious,
on the plateau halfway downhill, may trust
in the Madonna to shield and keep up

their fragile way of life. Not even prayer,
though, is an antidote for nature. It's the
mountain's nature not to nurse for good a
rage in patient silence. What's deep in there

must express itself sometime, the way lust
long-denied can still destroy a marriage
after many peaceful years. In old age,
dementia may emerge, enormous,

vengeful, from the small, frail, and once-meek.
It might happen tomorrow, or next week.

## THE CYCLE

You outlive interfering relatives.
You hold your tongue, you breathe, you count to ten.
You take a long walk when an argument
starts brewing. Now and then, you even give

in, let the bastards have their way this time.
They're old enough that you can simply wait
until the fellow with the cowl and scythe
shows up and raps three times upon the gate,

collects them like recycled glass and cans.
Then, when decisions rest in your own hands,
you and your children can enjoy the fruits
you owned at last when you donned those dark suits.

Your kids are grown. They're sure the suits will fit
them still, next time there's loot to inherit.

## WITH FRIENDS LIKE HIM…

The friend who saps your energy with sighs
will suddenly drop by, not calling first.
He'll breeze right in, though the reception's terse —
the clearest signals don't impress his eyes.

He takes after his mother, who controlled
his every move until she got too old.
He signed the papers to put her away
and never visits her. She's blessed, you'd say,

if he acquired the knack of hearing you.
No fear of that, however. He won't pause
enough to let a sentence or a clause
escape your lips. He overflows with news

about his every picayune complaint.
Not strangling him requires saintly restraint.

# THE MEDIOCRACY

Although the contest is impossible,
you hurl yourself into it bitterly,
as if losing's no option. You agree
to rules you find unreasonable,

Knowing that they're designed to screen you out.
Against that yardstick, you must measure up
to your own satisfaction. And you doubt
the one the prize gets handed to will stop

for long beside a truthful mirror. This
is not about what judges say it is.
You'll never understand the politics
that brand you broken, but give lesser lights a fix.

Official laurels only fit the bland.
Genuine art lurks in the margins, banned.

## WINDOW DRESSING

The headless mannequin is dressed to kill —
an odd expression, that, and yet it fits.
So do the costly clothes, which cling as if
the flesh beneath were warm, perhaps could fill

A hungry hand. Her fellow mannequins,
like her, have no hands, either — who knows why
companies make them incomplete, with skin
so icy white there's no way any life

could throb in there. You guess this is supposed
to make their outfits look more beautiful
to you; to make you think, were you enclosed
in their snug fit, you would be irresistible.

You wonder who such figures would attract —
Who'd want someone who can't talk, can't fight back.

## FRIENDING IS AN UNFAMILIAR VERB

He sends you a request to be his friend.
His name and face you can't say you recall.
You have no friends in common.  You scan all
his page reveals — his occupation and

his tastes, not much like yours. You wonder how
he picked you out. He lives a hundred miles
away. You must admit his face beguiles
a little bit. He knows it and seems proud

about it, though, which cancels out handsome
rewards. Some altitudes make you too apt
to fall.  Why go where you're easily trapped?
You add him up and get a minus sum.

Some eyes light up at an attractive stranger.
But when yours light up, it signals danger.

# SATURDAY NIGHT FERVOR

She got so aroused, she broke her rosary.
The wooden beads rolled down her legs like sweat.
She'd clutched it too hard, seen too vividly
her nearly-naked savior in her yet

unruly vision turned to fantasy.
Something about a longhaired, bearded man
like those on motorbikes, but nailed firmly
in place, unlike that gardener who ran;

a helpless grown man in only a diaper.
Her prayer went from murmuring to moans;
her free hand searched her purse for a moist wiper.
Beads clacked on the floor like fortuneteller's bones.

The priest, to whom she had confessed, thought: *Odd.*
*Hail Mary's don't include the words, "Oh, God."*

## THE TELLER

You said what you wished no one would repeat.
You couldn't help yourself. You choose to trust
the person you discussed it with; the heat
of it was too great to hold in. The lust

that you confessed needed a priest, I guess,
to not pass judgment on it, to permit
you to breathe easy. No collar would fit
the listener you chose, though; his address

is next to any open ear. Venom
may not be his opiate, yet "yes, but.."
is a blank he must fill in. He's from
a house where polite silence is *kaput.*

You learn the hard way what to tell or conceal,
and to and from whom. Now let the wound heal.

## UNEASY LIES…

Here is the blade with which you kill past pain;
deny the hurt its power over you.
Focus instead on rage; give anger supreme reign;
punish the many and reward the few

Who do whatever you demand. Afraid
is how you want both friends and enemies.
Neither will dare displease you; each tirade
will set forth further guidelines how to please.

Tyrants are seldom challenged. And the brave
would never follow where your bluster leads.
You don't need heroes who might want to save
the naïve souls an energy leech bleeds.

Your kingdom's peaceful if dissent's a crime.
Meanwhile, your high blood pressure bides its time.

# HITCHCOCK BLONDE

Her hair is always short — a practicality.
Her luminous eyes must not be obstructed.
Both she and others feel blessed when they see
into her depths, which she herself decided
not to hide, no matter whom it might attract.
She is an heir of Venus, placed on earth
to let poor poets see that beauty can be fact
of life, and, furthermore, there is no dearth
of it. For her, true blonde's both curse and boon.
It opens doors, makes some attractions mutual,
and is so coveted that rivals will assume
the color falsely, with a gaudy chemical.
But she, spreading her own wings, illustrates free will,
inspiring art, lust, and yes — even an envy that can kill.



# ETC: POEMS IN OTHER FORMS

## MAGICK WITH A K

Maximus, the magician,
exemplified tradition.
His books were old and dusty;
his spell-casting skills, rusty.

He feigned no miracles onstage;
he did not work to entertain.
But once, when drought
dried crops out, rain

rewarded Maximus.

# SECRET IDENTITY

The meek man with a boring job
and ordinary name
will disappear when danger's near
but not from fear or shame

He isn't who he seems to be
to those who share his days
concealing his capacity
to gracefully amaze

Beneath bland clothes a costume
clings to his sleek physique
like an exquisite statue's —
perfection at its peak

The cape does not cloak anything,
but like a flag will fly;
glasses don't grant him clarity.
but hide what friends deny

The hero is the one, you see,
who makes the loudest noise
but masks himself in sameness;
what's different, he destroys

To trust no one may not be brave —
but still, it will protect
the people who can't shield themselves
from light that's too direct

It is not good, nor evil,
but Truth weak eyes can't bear
in small doses, perfection
can't tempt us to compare

The dazzle of what passes
so fast it's just a blur
leaves us breathless and blinking —
but no philosopher

has time for bitter envy
when rescue rushes by
and leaves him safe, fall broken,
far below the fatal sky.

# NARCISSIST AND MASOCHIST: A PERFECT LOVE

Love is the hardest discipline
for somebody this self-involved.
He will prescribe harsh medicine
when your emotions get involved.

Your feelings inconvenience him?
The punishment will be quite grim.

When one person is dominant,
the other's needs get brushed away
consistently. An elephant-
sized ego always will betray

its ignorance that you are real.
Only one party gets to feel.

Expect him to humiliate
with ridicule fit for a child.
Expect him to pontificate
and leave the breach unreconciled.

There is no time to waste on you:
he's ruler; you're just retinue.

Wait — now there's more of you than one?
Abuse that goes on long enough,
and hard enough, can split askew
a personality and then sneer, "Tough!"

You'll have to compartmentalize;
your mind, your heart, your mind's blind eyes.

Multiple personality
may fly against Society,
but it's a mere frivolity
to his obliviosity.

A poet noted when the wood
splits, it's the saw that shrieks. Oh, good;
your nightmare lover is indeed —
though he wields a sharp blade that screams for blood —

Your nightmare lover is indeed
man of your dreams.

# SESTINA DENTATA

You dread procedures that involve your teeth.
You don't mind someone's tongue thrust in your mouth,
but hands have no place there. And any chair
whose parts move smacks of Inquisitions. Steel
outside a kitchen also triggers fear.
Such implements should only touch the dead.

Although the brief sting will leave your nerves dead,
you can't sit still for needles near your teeth.
The moment's pain is dull compared to fear
that still persists though drugs have numbed your mouth.
Your psychic nerves are hardly made of steel.
You're like a convict sentenced to The Chair,

although you flash on childhood and the barber's chair.
You felt imprisoned back then, too. Long dead,
your father smiled to see friends there, with steel
blades scraping their bared throats. He showed his teeth
as happy small talk flowed out of his mouth.
They talked of sports played by men without fear.

You don't belong on bloody fields. Fear
made you choose a safe career. A desk, chair,
bureaucratic buzz words you can mouth,
these keep you distant from what stops you dead.
You don't much like realities with teeth.
You haven't got the energy to steel

yourself to face what makes you faint. Steel
gleams in this room, and the taste of fear
wells up behind your firmly gritted teeth.
You're sitting in the "I surrender" chair.
Nothing to do but lie back and play dead.
Ignore the bustling work site in your mouth.

Now you are many miles from your own mouth.
Hysteria propelled you here. Steel
blades spun, raised a wind, lifted you dead
out of your body to a place where fear
gives way to curiosity — chair
far from the stage where characters gnash teeth.

Your mouth will thank the doctor; you'll feel fear's
seemingly steel grip left behind in the chair,
dead as numbed pain. You'll smile
through clenched teeth.

# ROUGH RIDE

Bob is in another of his rages,
swearing as his stiffened right arm steers.
His passenger sits next to him and ages.

The rider, it seems, holds his tongue for ages.
The seething started before he was here.
Bob is in another of his rages.

Bob's list of grievances goes on for pages,
though he's just ranting, not writing, it's clear.
His passenger sits next to him and ages.

The long silence that greets Bob will, by stages,
convey to him what he won't need to hear.
Bob is in another of his rages.

Some men with tempers end up locked in cages,
for lengths of time that span many a year.
Bob's passenger sits next to him and ages.

Like other illnesses that prove contagious,
Bob's rage drives off, sometimes, those he holds dear.
Bob is in another of his rages.
His passenger sits next to him and ages.

## SQUIRREL TRIP

Squirrel, Squirrel, chitter-chatter,
what on earth could be the matter?
In your phosphorescent tree —
nibbled on a mushroom. See,
a whole new universe:
nature never looked much worse.
Hawks are nothing next to that
daytime-flying orange bat
on the branch where once you sat,
peaceful as a chunk of rock.
All at once it starts to talk
like those humans, huge and scary,
of whom you've so long been wary.
Freaked, you flick your fluffy tail —
past you flies a killer whale
which you shouldn't recognize,
but new-liberated eyes
of an opened mind know worlds
mostly never seen by squirrels.
Down the trunk you flee toward grass —
waving, burning, clear as glass.
All these visions, all this light,
from one nauseating bite
of that shelf that grows among us —
that intoxicating fungus
full of luminosity.
You curse your curiosity.

# MIXED MARTIAL ARTS

Shirtless and barefoot, they dance in a ring.
Not far from naked, but not there for love.
They hurt each other in hopes of a prize.
Outside the cage, suited judges keep score.
Normally, violence we all deplore;
but this is graceful and skilled, and our eyes
drink every detail, each quicksilver move.
The mob applauds the best blows as they sting.

Hands and feet fly. Drops of blood, flung,
spatter the canvas beneath dancing feet.
Amplified voices describe every step
in the unraveling of one man's game,
in the strategic missteps we can blame.
Minutes tick by till the struggle must stop.
Rules will determine which man's labeled "beat."
They'll raise one's hand as his praises are sung.

After the battle, the men will embrace.
One lost the prize, but he mustn't lose face.
The winner, interviewed, praises the "heart"
of the colleague he just took apart.
No anger here — that's the sportsman's worst sin.
Then a bell rings; the next beating can begin.

## SHELL GAME

You try to shake the memory away,
as if it were just water in your hair
and you'd climbed from cold sea into the day
warmed by the dazzling sun, your tired feet bare
to burning star-white sand. You'd been fresh prey
to nearby predators that lurked back there,
but weren't aware. Through the tall, crashing waves,
you forced yourself toward shore. That focus saves.

Your own thoughts were the place that nearly drowned
you, so you gave yourself a goal. As far
out as you could, then back to solid ground.
Well, solid as the sand can be, You are aware
of how long sand castles will stand. Bizarre
the ease with which the young forget. Around
the jetty's end, a voice tells you, turn back.
The sea gets hungrier where depths turn black.

Beyond a certain age, sand walls won't do.
Certain amounts of effort exceed play;
beyond the point of going on, you're too
invested to just shovel sand. You turn away.
Waves keep coming in, creep up on you,
but you walk inland, going home to a new day.
The ocean's roar can be held in a shell
kept as a souvenir. It's just as well.

## THE DISCONNECTION

After the hang-up of the phone,
the man went silent as a stone;
after words meant to start a talk,
a sudden wall, a total block;
after the ending of the ride,
grief as if for one who died.
With death, at least there is no choice;
this loved one's will has stilled his voice.
He said, "I won't go anywhere,"
and then turned his back, standing there,
and froze himself. Now all you see
a statue just as well might be —
bronze until weather turns it green.
No words can mean anything worse
than such silences mean.

# GETTING TO OFF-BASE: A GUIDE TO OLD-FASHIONED DATING

You bide your time.
You tell yourself the "right moment" will come,
and you will recognize it as the prime
confluence for confessing yens unsung.

Your loved one smiles.
The look so full of meaning, no mistake
is possible. Your move can come true while
the stars are signaling which one to make.

Kiss those lips now.
Listen to irresistible desire.
Leap over the last barrier, and plow
ahead and plunge in right under the wire.

The gun goes off.
Or was that sound a slap, a sudden "no?"
Somehow you must have got your signals crossed,
or missed a moment that passed hours ago,

Or guessed wrong at some password you don't know.

# THE SURPRISINGLY SWEET TASTE OF BITTEN TONGUE

Anger remains.
The fight has ended, but rage like a scar,
standing out proudly, reddening your brains,
now dominates your thoughts, such as they are.

You won't forget.
Remember that you may one day forgive,
despite yourself, and find that you regret
what words emerge, and with which you must live.

Open your hands.
They hold nothing, and yet they fiercely clench,
tighten your shoulders, pump adrenal glands,
and your tensed brow with sweat they drench.

Now take a breath.
Why hold in such sour air, straining your chest?
Why give such energy to squeezing this to death?
There's no competing. This is not a test.
Sometimes to let the splash run off, stings less.

## AFTER SEEING A REVIVAL OF *HAIR*

We feel nostalgia for a time we thought
would change the world forever. It did not.
The war came to an end, but we forgot
to keep our vigil after grieving for the shot.

We thought never ending hedonism healed us.
Still, we paid our bills. Our comfort reeled us
in, like blind fish baited. Smoke concealed us
from each other's view. Pressure revealed us

as hog-tied by obligations. When our
own children rebelled, it was surprise that tolled
the hour
too late. They'd seen only pleasures, not the power
we had raised with our lost magic. So, shower

us with cynical dismissals; embrace
doctors' drugs prescribed to dull the seething soul.
We face
the crumbling of our blissful vision, trace
its outline in the dust of our dead peace.

Somehow, our generation's turn to rule the world
was skipped.
When our children demanded to be taught the dance,
we tried;
but it meant something new and painful when
we tripped.

# MUSINGS ON RAP
## (a work in progress)

To demonstrate the nature
of the rapper's nomenclature,
its effect on literAture —
while not meaning to berate your
taste in certain styles of rhyme —
I shall rattle off this sample
of the use of rhyme as ample
as the plastic in a land-fill
which will stay there for all time,
speckling every third word
with a rhyme defines this record
of the time. Reflect or express
things, but rhyme as if under duress.
I don't intend to satirize —
in opens, we all fraternize —
I simply point out, pattern-wise,
the frequency with which such rhyme occurs.
A rhyme *scheme* is at best
a distant dream; the past's a pest
we hold in low esteem.
I simply hope to solve the mystery
of this art form, which gives no nod to history.

No one remembers toasts
in barbershops and pool halls,
where rhyming tales were swapped and kept alive,
of the fellas who had legendary balls
and, as the movies say, "spoke Jive" —
like Stagger Lee and Shine,
Those long-dead friends of yours and mine.

Instead the scholars cite Skeltonics,
which was all the rage at Oxford
in the early 1500s,
in forgotten Britain, far from any blood's hood
where we'd find brothers who rap.
No one's influenced by that crap!
England's distant prissy fad Skeltonics
hasn't risen from its ashes like a phoenix
in the new world of Ebonics.
Hip hop happens at a faster clip
than that long-dead collegiate trip.
To find the deep root of this juicy meat,
you need to stay close to the street.

# THE DOOMED VILLAGE

*After the Hammer film,* Vampire Circus

The village has been quarantined with plague,
and anyone who tries to leave is shot.
To everyone's surprise — twisting the plot —
a circus caravan arrives, a rag-

tag troupe of vagabonds whose hands are hot
for coins. Perhaps they hope they can distract
the doomed ones from their pain; or they're attract-
ed by a captive audience. They're not

afraid, in any case. Delirious,
the townsfolk flock to see them — on parade
to the town square, led by a midget made
up like a clown. A panther leaps at those

in the front row, lands changed into a man.
Gasping, a girl still lets him kiss her hand.
The woman who opened his cage watches
this with a smile.
The desperate are easy to beguile.

## ART ARRIVES

Beyond attraction is infatuation
Beyond infatuation lies real love
One brings simply mindless stimulation
One brings inspiration that can move
mortal hands to genuine creation

Art flows from the fingertips thus driven
to express the soul behind mere mind
Art, more than flat matter, vibrates, living,
animated by a source apparently divine;
as if Spirit found a vein to mine

Inspiration's lightning strikes the trigger
and the subject sizzles into shape
This experience electric, bigger,
than the object at which our eyes gape
and the feeling we cannot escape

So we breathe life into what outlives us
what survives beyond our own short span
as if what created us forgives us
Suddenly we do the best we can
though the process seems to have no plan

We are a channel for something we see
when a flash, sudden, surrounds us
Our hands are moving, they're suddenly free
from the mundane chains that bound us
We've found a voice — or it's found us.

# CLOSE SHAVE WITH BROKEN GLASS

A chrome-framed mirror where you look to shave
throws back the blazing naked image of
your face, detailed to an unbearable
degree. You'd wince less if the light were coming from
behind you — but light is of the present, not
the past, no matter what they say
about dead stars and centuries
of wasted wishes. The lamp is closer to you than
the stars, though every scar's preceded by
the last; every mark commemorates its
cause, and each event goes on and disappears,
absorbed by some coarse fabric in the brain.
In light this bright, shadows remain.

The memory may lie buried in mud,
but you can still see where a blade drew blood.
A fist striking the glass leaves spreading cracks
like roads strewn through a map. You'd follow them
away if you were free. But we're all heading
somewhere not yet marked. A face flashes away
in the smashed glass, knowing nobody caught
what it last said before it fled its shattered world.
You're pretty sure you saw it sneer at you.

"To clean yourself up," as they say,
you must cut off
what grows. Then
you must turn
away.

# PLENTY

Too many telephones
crying for answers;
they jangle your bones

Too many temperatures
rising when threatened,
and so insecure

Too many rules to bend
simply by being
oneself's own true friend

Too many little stings
leaving their sad scars
on everyone's wings

Too many falling stars
leaving a dark sky
past windows with bars

Too many shouting "I"
by which they must mean
some fantasized guy

Too much aquamarine
under these overtones
not enough green

Too many throwing stones
not enough dancers
with tunes of their own

# POST-OPERATIVE MIRAGE

The pain that the procedure left behind
at first throbbed in the flesh, and flesh alone;
after the body's healing, pin-pricks in the mind
seemed to have sunk in, stabbing to the bone,
and your ability to sit and work
was still cut short, but now by a learned quirk.

At first throbbing in flesh, and flesh alone,
the body's need for vengeance would infect
the conscious mind, dumb as a box of stones,
its undertow drowning the intellect.
Without words, automatically the habit
zoomed to the forefront like a racing rabbit.

After the body's healing, pin pricks in the mind,
no longer thoughts, shrunk down, invisible,
ditched your will, left in dust raised by a blind
compulsion that usurped the throne with dribble
down through layers that were more like mud
than brain,
its power to persuade brute-forceful as persistent rain.

Seemed to have sunk in, stabbing to the bone,
the way hypnotic voices on TV,
when we've dozed off, make of our dreams their home,
shout down the intellect, too tired to disagree.
You're frightened, though no proof has barred your door.
It need not make sense that a ghost-limb has grown sore.

Still your ability to sit and work
for any length of time does not resume.
You've been convinced, somehow, by imps that lurk
in closets of your dream-forgotten room
that your recuperation will be long
and slow. Your symptoms, not your limbs, are strong.

Weekdays cut short, by merely a learned quirk,
gang up on you like ghosts, felt but not seen.
A vanished wound excuses you from work;
you're not aware you're trapped in a stuck dream.
For these hallucinations to erase,
waking life must throw cold water in your face.

## STRAY POEM

It seems a dark day, though the sun beats down.
The future seems a thing I'd best ignore.
I hope I live to see what I've prayed for
come true, but cringe at unexpected sound.
The trauma I've been able to survive
should be a source of confidence, some say.
I should be ready for whatever they
might throw at me, but I feel half alive.
I face the page, but don't know what to say.
Would anybody listen anyway?

## PROTECTION SPELL

*Mee-chai-el,* protect me well.
Banish what harm upon me fell.
Back to its source, this force repel.
Three-fold's the law; just is the spell.

Your shield I raise against attack;
deflect this force, reflect it back.
Freedom from evil I desire,
Lord of the South, Lord of the Fire.

Let this child live free from abuse.
This rain of blows I now refuse.
Back to its source, this force now send.
So mote it be. Selah. Amen.



# POETRY AND MAGICK

Some of my more attuned readers may have discerned, from such poems as "The Green Man," "Something Sensed On Samhain," and "Protection Spell," that I'm a pagan. I present the following poem for those who might find it interesting or useful. Those who are frightened by such things can feel free to ignore it. Remember, magick is simply a highly focused form of prayer. I thought readers of poetry might — having been exposed to the ad-libbed doggerel that passes for spells in such media as the TV show "Charmed" — might find it curious to sample serious magickal writing.

What follows is a complete ceremonial magick Working in the form of a poem that contains all the necessary steps for a ritual. A reader can use it to cast his or her own spell by adding a stanza of his / her own in the space indicated, stating their intention/desire. Recite the customized poem outdoors at night, visualizing the events described in it as vividly as you can. You should feel a surge of energy building within you and then releasing at the end of the poem. Burn the poem and scatter its ashes to the wind, and your wish will become enshrined on the Astral plane, to later manifest on this material plane ("As above, so below.")

## A RUNE FOR ALL REASONS

Up through my roots, down through my wings,
into my core, energy sings.
Through mind gone still, through words that dance,
descend upon me, sacred trance.

Let all impediments to grace
now be banished from this place.
Salted water, smoke of sage,
cast out all trace of doubt, fear, rage.

Rise up, flame, and circle 'round —
within, protection will be found.
The forces raised within your frame,
Circle of Power, you'll contain.

Spirits of East, South, West, North,
I summon, stir, and call you forth.
Graces of thought, change, feeling, fact —
these gifts now let your strength attract.

O Lady, Queen of Earth and Sea,
come to my aid, I cry to Thee.
O Lord of Air, O lord of Fire,
come and bring form to my desire.

O light that rises, light that spins,
I raise you as the Work begins.
O swirling cone of power, I pray
that you now do as I now say.

*(Insert a quatrain of your own here, strongly stating the goal of your magickal spell.)*

O mighty Ones, you are released
with thanks and love by this your priest.
O Circle, open your embrace,
O Power, to your task make haste.

Sun, Moon, Stars, Planets, now hear ye —
align yourselves compatibly!
Let no reversal trouble me —
as is my will, So mote it be!

# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

"A Rune for all Reasons" was published previously in the book *To Light a Sacred Flame* by Silver RavenWolf (Llewellen Press, 1999).

Other poems in this volume have previously appeared in *Christopher Street, Experimental Forest, Fledgling Rag, The Horror 'Zine, Insight, Philadelphia Poets, Wild Onions*, and in the blog *Sun Through A Broken Window*, as well as in Jack Veasey's collections *The Moon In The Nest* (Crosstown Books, 2012) and *Shapely: Selected Formal Poems* (The Poet's Press, 2013.)

# ABOUT THE POET

Jack Veasey (1955-2016) was a Philadelphia native who lived in Hummelstown, PA for over 20 years. He was the author of twelve previous published collections of poetry, most recently *The Dance That Begins And Begins* (The Poet's Press, 2015).

His poems also appeared in many periodicals including *Christopher Street, The Pittsburgh Quarterly, Assaracus, Harbinger: A Journal of Social Ecology, The Philadelphia Daily News, The Painted Bride Quarterly, Fledgling Rag, Oxalis, The Blue Guitar, Bone and Flesh, Zone: A Feminist Journal for Women and Men, Film Library Quarterly (Museum of Modern Art, NYC), Experimental Forest, Tabula Rasa, Wild Onions, Mouth of the Dragon, Asphodel, Insight, The Irish Edition, The Harrisburg Patriot-News, The Harrisburg Review, The Princeton Spectrum, The Little Word Machine (U.K.),* and *The Body Politic (Canada),* among others. His work also appeared in a number of anthologies, including *Common Wealth: Contemporary Poets On Pennsylvania* (Penn State University Press), *Sweet Jesus: Poems About The Ultimate Icon* (Anthology Press, Los Angeles), and *A Loving Testimony: Remembering Loved Ones Lost to AIDS* (The Crossing Press, Freedom, CA).

His plays were produced by Theater Center Philadelphia and Theater of the Seventh Sister (Lancaster, PA). He hosted literary radio programs for WITF FM in Harrisburg and WXPN FM in Philadelphia. He was awarded a Fellowship from the PA Council On The Arts and was a two-time honoree of The PA Center For The Book's PENNBOOK celebration. For many years he hosted poetry readings in the Harrisburg area at The Art Association of Harrisburg's Paper Sword series and at Encore Books and Music, Borders Books and Music, and Open Stage of Harrisburg, and also taught poetry writing courses at Harrisburg Area Community College Community Education Center, Martin Memorial Library in York, and for the Dauphin County Library System. He was a member of Harrisburg's notorious (Almost) Uptown Poetry Cartel.

Veasey spent the seventies and eighties working as a journalist for such publications as *The Philadelphia Inquirer, Philadelphia Magazine, Pennsylvania Magazine, APPRISE, The Philadelphia City Paper,* and *The Cherry Hill Courier Post*, and editing a number of periodicals in Philadelphia and New York, including *The South St. Star, The Philadelphia Gay News,* and *FirstHand Magazine*. His articles for the *Philadelphia Gay News* won two awards from the national Lesbian And Gay Press Association. He recently wrote an article on Walt Whitman's relation-

ship with his longtime companion Peter Doyle that was syndicated to 40 periodicals nationwide by the Gay History Project, followed by another article about Whitman's involvement in the United States Civil War.

A singer as well as a poet, Veasey released one CD album of original songs, "Build A Fire," as lead singer of the folk-rock duo Open Book. In 2010, Veasey released a CD single of another original song, "Whether Or Not The World Knows." He formerly sang second tenor with the Harrisburg Gay Men's Chorus. He lived with his partner in life, David Walker, since 1978.

# ABOUT THIS BOOK

The body text of this book is typeset in Schneidler, also known as Stempel Schneidler, designed by F. Ernst Schneidler in 1936 for the Bauer Foundry. This was a distinctive hot metal typeface, with cupped serifs, handsome italics, and a quirky question mark. The design is inspired by Renaissance Venetian typefaces.

Headlines and titles are typeset in Futura, a Bauhaus-influenced type that came to be one of the most popular sans-serif faces of the 20th century. Its geometric emphasis and even width of stroke takes its form from classic Greek column lettering, but looks completely modern because of its strict use of geometric forms (circles and isosceles triangles). The hot metal face was designed in 1927 for the Bauer foundry in Germany.

The cover art, by Brett Rutherford, employs beads used in ceremonies devoted to the Afro-Cuban (Santería) god Eleggua, the opener of doorways and the Hermes of the Orisha pantheon. This makes the cover a word play on Sonneteria/Santería. A figurine of Eleggua appears on the title-page.

The Poet's Press was Jack Veasey's first publisher when he was nineteen years old, and we were honored to do two more books in 2013 and 2015. Early in 2016, Jack entrusted the manuscript for this book to us, writing: "This [book] and *Shapely* (2013) comprise my collected formal poems. . . . Being in constant physical pain has made me nervous about my health, and I wanted to have the remainder of my work organized and in your hands 'just in case.' I'd like *Sonneteria* to be my next title. I just have this unnverving feeling lately that the end of my rope isn't as unimaginably distant as it used to be." We had no chance to discuss the editorial or design aspects of the book: Jack died in mid-summer of that year.

In *The Dance That Begins and Begins,* published by The Poet's Press in 2015, Veasey offered his selected poems of 1973-2013, making these three volumes his poetic legacy.

